Bone & Blaze
Some Trails Are Traveled Alone,
Some Trails Are Traveled Together
STRANGEWOVEN

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A STRANGEWOVEN STORY

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CHAPTER 1

Bones That Blaze Trails

I had a name once. I'm reasonably certain of that. People generally do. Whatever it was, I carried it for some portion of my life, and I suppose there was probably a time when hearing it spoken would have caused me to turn my head. But I've been traveling alone for so long that the name doesn't seem particularly important anymore. I didn't lose it in some dramatic fashion. There wasn't a morning when I woke beside a dying campfire, stared into the distance, and discovered that my identity had vanished with the smoke. I simply stopped needing it. People met me. I met them. Then I kept walking. Occasionally I passed through the same town twice. Sometimes three or four times, with months or even years between visits. People began recognizing me. I suppose a walking skeleton wearing a fedora and carrying a backpack has certain advantages when it comes to being memorable. One afternoon, in a town whose name I remember better than the name of the man who said it, somebody spotted me coming down the road. He laughed. "Look at you. Those bones of yours have blazed some trails." I stopped. I liked that. Not because it sounded heroic. It didn't. It sounded accurate. I had walked a lot of trails. "Bone," I said. The man looked at me. "What?" "I think I'll go by Bone." He stared for a moment. Then shrugged. "Suit yourself, Bone." So I did. And that was that. No ceremony. No revelation. Just a name that fit better than the one I couldn't remember. Bone. I've been called worse. Probably.

That particular morning found me walking beneath trees on Washington's Olympic Peninsula. The night had rained. This was not especially noteworthy. Water seemed to have negotiated a permanent residence in this part of the world. It hung from needles and leaves, collected along branches, gathered in little pools beside the trail and occasionally waited until I was directly beneath a tree before dropping down the back of my collar. I stopped when that happened. Cold water traveled down my spine. I looked up. The tree offered no explanation. "That seemed unnecessary." A droplet fell from another branch and struck the brim of my fedora. I adjusted the hat. "Point taken." Then I continued walking. My boots sank slightly into the damp trail.

The forest smelled of wet earth, bark, moss and that particular green smell forests acquire after rain. Mist lingered between the trees, thick enough in places to soften the farther trunks into gray silhouettes. I wasn't headed anywhere particularly important. That's another thing worth knowing about me. I like destinations. I simply don't require one. There are people who decide where they want to go, determine the fastest route to get there and measure the success of the journey by whether they arrived on schedule. Nothing wrong with that. I'm just not particularly good at it. Give me a trail, enough supplies, a reasonable understanding of where I'm allowed to camp and a map showing enough of the surrounding country to keep me from accidentally walking into something I shouldn't, and I'm generally satisfied. If something interesting appears along the way, I stop. If nothing interesting appears, I keep walking until something does. Something always does. That morning it was a spiderweb. I almost walked past it. A thin strand stretched between two small branches beside the trail. Then I noticed another. And another. I stopped. The web was enormous. Rain had collected along the silk in hundreds of tiny droplets. The forest behind it was dark, but the clouds overhead were beginning to thin. Every few seconds the light changed just enough that some of those droplets caught it. I stood there watching. Then I slipped one shoulder out of my pack. The camera was packed where I could reach it without emptying half my belongings onto the trail. I'd learned that lesson years ago. A photograph has very little patience for a photographer who needs ten minutes to find his camera. I took it out. Looked through the viewfinder. Not yet. The light was wrong. I moved a few feet. Better. The web was there, but the droplets disappeared against the background. I crouched. Worse. I stood again. A patch of brightness was slowly moving across the forest as the clouds shifted overhead. So I waited. That's the part of photography I enjoy most. Waiting. Anyone can point a camera at something beautiful. Sometimes the trick is recognizing that what you're looking at isn't quite the photograph yet. I leaned against a tree. A minute passed. Then two. The clouds moved. For perhaps five seconds, sunlight found a narrow opening overhead. The droplets lit up. I raised the camera. Click. Then the light vanished. I checked the image. "Hmm." Not bad. I took another photograph after the light returned, this time framing more of the surrounding forest. That one was better. I put the camera away. Two photographs. Twenty minutes. Worth it. I shouldered my pack and continued down the trail.

Traveling alone teaches you rather quickly what deserves space in a backpack. Everything weighs something. Food weighs something. Water weighs considerably more than you want it to. Extra clothing weighs something. A camera weighs something. A book weighs something. Four

books weigh enough to make you question several of your recent decisions. I liked books. My back did not. So we'd reached an arrangement. I kept very few. There were a couple that had traveled with me for a long time. They had earned their place. Their covers were worn, their corners softened, and I could open some of them close to favorite passages without trying. The others came and went. I'd read one, carry it until I encountered a used bookstore, and see what I could get in trade. Sometimes I received store credit. Sometimes an owner was willing to exchange books directly. Sometimes I simply left a finished book somewhere another traveler might find it. A good story didn't become less valuable because I stopped owning it. If anything, I liked the thought of somebody else finding it. Books should travel too. That morning I had one such book tucked into my pack. I'd finished it the previous night. It was a decent mystery. I had guessed the murderer approximately thirty pages before I was apparently supposed to, but I didn't hold that against the book. Much. I also carried a regional history I'd been reading slowly. That one wasn't going anywhere yet. I wanted to know more about the country I was walking through. I always did. There's something strange about standing somewhere beautiful without wondering what happened there before you arrived. Who walked here? Who lived here? What changed? What survived? What did people get wrong when they wrote it down later? The Olympic Peninsula had stories layered upon stories, reaching far deeper into the past than the roads and towns I passed through. The modern maps might show park boundaries, highways and trails, but people had known this landscape long before any of those lines existed. That mattered. I didn't need every trail to begin with someone who looked like me. Granted, finding someone who looked exactly like me would probably have raised additional questions. I kept walking.

Near midday the trail climbed. The forest gradually opened enough for me to catch glimpses of the mountains through the trees. I stopped once. Then again. On the third glimpse, I gave up pretending I wasn't going to take another photograph. I left the trail only as far as I could without trampling vegetation and found a clear view. Clouds covered most of the mountains. A lot of photographers would have called that unfortunate. I didn't. The clouds were moving. Slowly. A ridge appeared. Disappeared. Another emerged farther away. For a few moments, sunlight broke through and illuminated one section of forest while everything behind it remained beneath the storm. I took one photograph. Then lowered the camera. Not right. I waited. The sunlight disappeared. Rain began. "Of course." I protected the camera beneath my jacket. The rain strengthened for perhaps a minute, then softened into a fine shower. I could have continued walking. Instead I stood beneath the trees. The mountains were almost completely gone now. I waited anyway. Five

minutes. Ten. The clouds shifted again. This time the sunlight came through behind them. Not a clear sunrise. Not a postcard-blue sky. Something better. Light poured through broken cloud in pale shafts. Rain drifted across the valley below, and one distant ridge emerged through it while the others remained hidden. I raised the camera. Click. I waited. The light strengthened. Click. Then it was gone. I looked at the second image. "Well." That one was staying. I smiled and packed the camera away. The photograph I'd imagined when I stopped hadn't happened. I was glad. This was better.

By afternoon, the trail had become less cooperative. Rain had turned a descending section slick enough that I slowed considerably. I tested the ground ahead with my walking staff. Solid. One step. Then another. I wasn't in a hurry. That is one of the great advantages of not having somewhere to be. A small stream crossed the trail farther down. Yesterday it might have been smaller. Today it had opinions. I stopped several feet back and studied it. The water wasn't especially deep, but it was moving quickly enough over wet rocks that stepping directly through it seemed like an excellent way to convert a pleasant afternoon into an embarrassing story. I looked upstream. Then downstream. The trail continued on the opposite bank. I could probably cross here. Probably is a useful word. It is not always a useful plan. So I walked upstream. The ground became rougher. Fallen branches forced me around them. Twice I thought I'd found a better crossing and changed my mind. The third looked promising. A fallen tree stretched across the narrowest section. I studied it. Wet bark. Running water underneath. "No." I kept walking. Another hundred yards upstream, the channel widened and shallowed. Stones broke the surface in several places, and the current was noticeably gentler. "Much better." I tested the first stone. Stable. The second. Stable. The third shifted slightly. I withdrew my foot. "You're a liar." I found another. A few careful steps later, I reached the opposite bank with nothing more dramatic than one wet boot. I considered that a victory. Then I had to work my way back downstream to find the trail. That took considerably longer than crossing the water. I didn't mind. Along the way I found a cedar stump with new growth rising around it, a tiny mushroom pushing through a bed of moss, and an opening through the trees that gave me another view of the valley. I photographed the stump. Not the valley. I'd already photographed mountains today. The stump was more interesting.

I reached a small town late that afternoon. The first thing I noticed was a wooden sign. The second was a place serving coffee. The third was a used bookstore. This created an obvious scheduling problem. Coffee won by approximately fifteen seconds. I walked into the bookstore carrying a paper cup. A little bell rang above the door. The place smelled

exactly the way a used bookstore should. Old paper. Wood. Dust. And something I couldn't identify but had encountered in nearly every used bookstore I'd ever entered. Maybe it was simply the smell of books waiting for somebody. Shelves filled most of the room. More books were stacked on the floor. There were books beneath a table. Books on the table. Books behind the counter. I immediately liked whoever was responsible. A woman looked up from behind the counter. "Afternoon." "Afternoon." "Looking for anything?" "Unfortunately." She smiled. "That's how it starts." I took the finished mystery from my pack. "Do you take trades?" "Sometimes." I handed it over. She examined the cover, flipped through it, checked the spine. "Read it?" "Last night." "Any good?" "Good enough that I finished it." "That's not exactly a glowing recommendation." "I guessed the murderer early." She looked at the cover. "Was it the brother?" I stared at her. She grinned. "Read it years ago." "Then yes." She offered me a modest amount of store credit. I accepted. Then I made the mistake of browsing. Half an hour later, I had three possibilities stacked on a table. I stared at them. Then at my backpack. The backpack had made its position clear before we'd entered the building. One book was about the history of Washington's coastal communities. Another was a collection of regional stories. The third was an adventure novel with a wonderfully ridiculous cover. I picked up the history. Put it down. Picked up the novel. Put it down. The woman behind the counter watched all of this. "Serious decision?" "I have to carry the winner." She laughed. "Traveling on foot?" "Mostly." "Then I'd take the little one." She pointed at the adventure novel. I considered it. "That's disturbingly sensible." "Twenty years selling books." I picked up the smaller novel. Then looked back at the history. The woman shook her head. "No." "I didn't say anything." "You didn't have to." I sighed. The history book returned to the shelf. "Some books you keep," I said. "Some books you pass along." "And some books stay in the shop because they're heavy." "Exactly." I paid the difference after my credit. The new book fit easily into my pack. The woman looked at my camera as I adjusted the strap. "Photographer?" "I take pictures." "That's usually what photographers do." "Then apparently I am." She pointed toward the window. "If you're staying nearby tonight, there's a place west of town where you can sometimes get a good sunset." I looked outside. The sky was still heavily clouded. "Doesn't look promising." "No." I waited. She waited. I smiled. "Which way?" She gave me directions.

I reached the overlook with plenty of time. The sunset was terrible. At least, it was terrible if the goal was to photograph the sun. Clouds swallowed the western horizon. There was no brilliant orange sky. No dramatic disk of sunlight dropping toward the water. Just gray. I set down my pack. Sat. Took out my new book. And waited. The first twenty minutes produced nothing. The next twenty produced more

gray. I read. Wind moved through the trees behind me. I turned a page. Then something changed. The clouds didn't clear. Instead, the bottom of them caught the light. A thin band of gold appeared near the horizon. Then another. The gray clouds above darkened by comparison, becoming enormous shapes stacked across the sky. I closed the book. The camera came out. The gold strengthened. Rain was falling somewhere in the distance. I could see it beneath the clouds, a gray curtain illuminated along one edge by the sinking sun. I adjusted my position. Waited. The light moved. Waited. For several seconds, one narrow opening appeared between the clouds. Sunlight poured through. The distant rain glowed. Click. I lowered the camera. The opening closed. That was it. No second chance. I checked the photograph. Then I looked back at the sky. "Thank you." I wasn't entirely sure who I was thanking. It didn't matter.

That night, I found a legal place to camp and settled in. Dinner was simple. The new book was ridiculous. I enjoyed it immensely. The rain returned after dark, tapping softly against my shelter. I lay there listening. Tomorrow I might head toward the coast. Or inland. There was a small historical collection I'd heard about farther north. That sounded interesting. Then again, somebody at the bookstore had mentioned an old trail I hadn't walked. Also interesting. I hadn't decided. I didn't need to. There would be time in the morning. I had enough food. Enough water. A dry place to sleep. A camera full of photographs. A book I hadn't finished. And somewhere beyond the little circle of ground I'd occupied for the night, there were trails I hadn't walked yet. That was enough. I was Bone. I traveled alone. And I liked it that way. For now. Some Trails Are Traveled Alone, Some Trails Are Traveled Together

CHAPTER 2

The Long Way Around

I woke to rain. Again. Not heavy rain. Nothing dramatic enough to justify staying put. Just the persistent sort that seemed to regard the Olympic Peninsula less as somewhere rain happened and more as its permanent mailing address. I lay still for a while and listened to it. There is a difference between waking to rain when you have somewhere you need to be and waking to rain when you don't. The first is inconvenient. The second is weather. I was fortunate enough to have the second. Eventually I sat up. "All right." The rain continued. "I wasn't complaining." Apparently satisfied, it continued anyway. Breakfast was oatmeal, dried fruit, and coffee. The coffee was considerably more important than the other two. While I ate, I studied my map. Yesterday I'd considered heading toward the coast. I'd also considered heading farther inland. There was a small historical collection I'd heard about, although it wasn't directly along either route. That made three possibilities. I took another drink of coffee. The map didn't offer an opinion. I folded it. "Coast." There. Decision made. Probably.

Breaking camp in the rain is an exercise in accepting that some things are going to get wet. The important part is deciding which things. I packed carefully, keeping the contents of my backpack dry while accepting that the exterior had entered into a committed relationship with Washington precipitation. My camera stayed protected. So did the books. My sleeping gear was dry. My jacket was already wet. That seemed fair. Before leaving, I checked the campsite. Nothing left behind. Then I started walking. The rain softened. By the time I'd gone a mile, it had become mist. Another mile and even that began disappearing. The forest changed slowly around me. That's something you miss when you travel too quickly. In a vehicle, one landscape can become another between songs on the radio. Walking makes you watch the transition. Trees changed. The ground changed. The smell changed. Even the quality of the light shifted as the clouds thinned overhead. I stopped beside a patch of ferns where water had collected at their tips. For a moment I considered taking out the camera. Then I didn't. Not

everything needed to become a photograph. Sometimes looking was enough. I kept walking.

By late morning I'd reached a road. This was not the road I expected. I checked the map. Then the road. Then the map again. "Hmm." According to the map, the route I wanted should have continued in approximately the direction I was facing. According to reality, there was a locked gate. A sign explained that the road beyond it was closed. I read the sign. Then I looked at the map. The map seemed embarrassed. "Don't worry. Happens to everyone." I walked closer to the sign. There was no ambiguity. The route was closed ahead, and the closure wasn't the sort where a pedestrian could reasonably say, Well, surely they don't mean me. They meant me. I could return several miles and take another road. Or I could continue along a different route that eventually curved toward a small community before reconnecting farther west. I studied the map. The second route was longer. Significantly longer. I smiled. "Well." Longer wasn't necessarily worse. I turned.

The detour followed a quieter road. There wasn't much traffic, which suited me. For the first few miles, nothing particularly interesting happened. This also suited me. There is a temptation when telling stories about travel to remove all the stretches where nothing happens. I understand why. Nobody wants to read seventeen pages describing a man walking past trees. Tree. Another tree. Particularly ambitious tree. But those quiet stretches are part of traveling too. Your mind wanders. You notice things. You think about things that don't deserve thinking about. For approximately twenty minutes, I considered whether a sandwich could still technically be called a sandwich if the bread had completely fallen apart inside the wrapper. I eventually concluded that it could. I had no supporting evidence. The road climbed gently. Somewhere to my left, water moved through the forest. I couldn't see it, but I could hear it. A raven called from somewhere overhead. I looked up. Nothing. "Good talk." The raven called again. I continued. A few minutes later it flew across the road ahead of me. I stopped. Black wings against a pale gray sky. My hand went toward the camera. Too late. The raven disappeared between the trees. I lowered my hand. "Fine." Not every photograph waited.

Around noon I found a place to stop for lunch. It wasn't particularly scenic. A gravel turnout. Trees. A battered guardrail. A view through the branches toward a river below. Perfect. I removed my pack and sat. The sandwich from my earlier philosophical investigation had indeed suffered structural failure. I ate it anyway. Food tastes different when you've carried it. Not necessarily better. But you're considerably less inclined to waste it. I was halfway through lunch when I noticed something carved into the guardrail. Initials. A heart. Two names. A date

from years earlier. I ran a finger near the carving without touching it. People have an interesting need to leave evidence that they were somewhere. Initials in trees. Names scratched into stone. Stickers on signs. Graffiti. Photographs. I looked at my camera. “All right. Fair point.” I took a picture of the carving. Not because it was beautiful. It wasn’t. Not because I approved of carving names into public property. I didn’t. But somebody had once stood exactly where I was sitting and decided that this particular moment, with this particular person, deserved permanence. The guardrail had rusted around their declaration. The forest had grown. The river below kept moving. And the names were still there. I put the camera away. Then I finished the remains of my sandwich.

The road eventually descended toward a small cluster of buildings. I hadn’t planned to stop. Then I saw the sign. BOOKS There are times when a person must demonstrate discipline. This wasn’t one of them. The building was small enough that I wasn’t entirely certain it was a bookstore until I opened the door. A bell rang. A man behind the counter looked up. He was perhaps sixty, with gray hair pulled into a short ponytail and reading glasses balanced low on his nose. He looked at me. Then at my backpack. Then at the camera. “Hiker?” “Mostly.” He glanced at my skull. “Long trip?” “Apparently.” That earned a smile. “Looking for something?” “No.” “Those are the dangerous customers.” “I’ve been told.” The store was part bookstore, part antique shop, part collection of objects whose original purposes had probably been forgotten. Books occupied shelves along two walls. Old tools hung from another. There were photographs. Maps. Postcards. A wooden snowshoe. Several fishing reels. A typewriter. And an object on a high shelf that I stared at for several seconds before deciding I genuinely had no idea what it was. The owner noticed. “Apple peeler.” “Of course it is.” “You didn’t know.” “Not even slightly.” He laughed. I browsed. I had bought a book yesterday. I did not need another book. This was important. I reminded myself several times. Then I found a shelf labeled LOCAL HISTORY. “That’s unfair.” The owner looked over. “What?” “Nothing.” I picked up a thin volume. It was old, but not valuable-old. More like somebody printed this locally forty years ago and now the binding has opinions old. The title concerned settlements and early roads on the peninsula. I opened it. There were maps. Photographs. Firsthand recollections. I checked the price. Then I checked the weight. This was how traveling on foot taught financial responsibility. Not through budgeting. Through gravity. The owner wandered over. “Good one.” “You’ve read it?” “Most of it.” I flipped another page. “That’s not helping.” “Trying not to.” I smiled. Then I noticed a photograph on the wall behind him. It showed a road almost completely swallowed by forest. “Where’s that?” He turned. “Old logging road. Or what’s left of one.” “Nearby?” “Couple

miles." I closed the book. The owner sighed. "Now I've done it." "Done what?" "You're going to go look." I considered denying it. There didn't seem much point. "Probably." He gave me directions. Then he pointed at the book. "You buying that?" I looked at it. Then at my pack. Then back at the book. "No." "Good." I stared at him. "You're terrible at this." "I've owned this place thirty-two years. It'll probably still be here next time." That was somehow worse. I returned the book to the shelf. "Do you have postcards?" He pointed. I bought one showing the coastline. It weighed almost nothing. Victory.

The old road was exactly where he'd said it would be. Mostly. Finding the entrance took twenty minutes. The first opening I investigated led nowhere. The second turned out to be somebody's driveway. I retreated before becoming part of a conversation beginning with, Can I help you? The third was correct. The road hadn't been a road for a long time. Vegetation had reclaimed much of it, but the shape remained. Two faint depressions ran beneath moss and grass. Trees grew where vehicles had once traveled. I stood at the entrance. There is something I like about abandoned roads. Trails usually look as though they belong to the landscape. Old roads look like arguments the landscape eventually won. I took out the camera. The first photograph was obvious. Too obvious. Road centered. Trees on both sides. Straightforward. I lowered the camera. Walked farther. The old grade curved. A young tree grew directly from one of the former wheel tracks. Better. I moved to one side. Through the viewfinder, the road became less obvious. You had to look for it. That was better still. I waited. The clouds moved overhead. Light filtered through the trees. Not dramatic. Soft. Quiet. Exactly right. Click. I checked the photograph. Keeper. I continued along the old grade.

The bookstore owner had said the road went "a ways." This was technically accurate. It was also useless. I walked for perhaps half an hour. The forest became thicker. The road narrowed until I was following little more than a suggestion. Then I found the bridge. Or rather, I found where a bridge had once been. The road ended at a creek. On the opposite side, the grade continued. Between them was water. I stood at the edge. "Well." Pieces of old timber remained near the banks, dark with age and moisture. Whatever had once crossed the creek was long gone. The water wasn't especially wide. But it was deeper than the stream I'd crossed yesterday. I walked upstream. Steep bank. Downstream. Worse. I returned to the old bridge site. Could I cross? Probably. There was that word again. I sat on a fallen log. There was no reason to cross. This seems obvious. It was less obvious while sitting there looking at the road continuing on the other side. I took out the postcard I'd bought. Looked at it. Put it away. I took out my map. The old road wasn't marked. I looked across the creek. Curiosity is useful. Curiosity has also probably

been responsible for a significant percentage of humanity's avoidable injuries. I stayed seated. "Not today." It bothered me. Which was precisely why I didn't do it. Sometimes traveling alone means being the only person available to tell you that your idea is stupid. You learn to listen. Eventually. I photographed the remains of the bridge instead. Old timber. Running water. Forest swallowing both ends of the road. That photograph wasn't about where the road went. It was about where it stopped. I liked that better. Then I turned around.

On the walk back, I noticed something I'd missed. A small metal object protruded from the moss beside the old grade. I crouched. Rust. Round head. Partially buried. I brushed away loose leaves without disturbing the soil much. An old spike. Probably related to whatever use the road had once served. I didn't pull it out. I didn't take it. Things don't become mine simply because I notice them. But I photographed it. One close shot. Then another with enough of the surrounding moss to show how thoroughly the forest had begun reclaiming it. I stood. "Three." Three photographs from one unplanned detour. Not bad.

When I returned to the bookstore, the owner was standing outside. He saw me coming. "You found it." "I did." "Cross the creek?" "No." He nodded. "Good." I stopped. "Why?" "Bridge has been gone longer than I've been alive. Other side gets rough." "You could have mentioned that." "I did." "When?" "I said the road went a ways." I stared at him. He smiled. "I didn't say it went anywhere." I considered this. "That's annoyingly fair." He laughed. I showed him the photograph of the road. He studied it longer than I expected. "That's good." "Thank you." He handed the camera back. "Funny. I've known that road my whole life. Never looked at it like that." That's one of the nicest things anyone can say about a photograph. I didn't tell him. Instead I said, "You know anything about who built it?" "Some. Not enough." He glanced toward the shop. "I've got something." We went inside. He disappeared into the back and returned carrying a folder. Photocopies. Old maps. A newspaper clipping. Nothing especially rare. Everything interesting. We stood at the counter for nearly an hour. He told me what he knew. I asked questions. Some he could answer. Some he couldn't. When he didn't know, he said so. I liked him more for that. Eventually he looked at the clock. "You camping nearby?" "Eventually." "There's a decent spot another few miles west. Legal camping area. Nothing fancy." "Nothing fancy is usually within my budget." He gave me directions. Before leaving, I looked again at the local history book. He noticed. "No." "I wasn't doing anything." "You were thinking." "That's generally encouraged." "Not near heavy books." I left without it. Barely.

The campsite was quiet. No spectacular overlook. No mountain vista. No sunset worth waiting for. Just trees, damp earth, and enough shelter from the wind to make the evening comfortable. I made dinner. Then coffee. Then I took out the adventure novel I'd bought the day before. The hero was currently attempting to escape from an underground fortress by means of a rope, a broken sword and what appeared to be complete ignorance of structural engineering. I was enjoying myself tremendously. Darkness settled around the campsite. I read until the words became difficult to see. Then I marked my page and closed the book. Somewhere in the forest, something moved through the brush. I listened. Probably a small animal. A few seconds later, silence returned. I thought about the old road. The bridge. The spike disappearing into moss. The bookstore owner. None of it had been part of my plan that morning. Then again, neither had the road closure. If the original route had been open, I would have walked straight past all of it. I leaned back. That happened surprisingly often. You start toward one place. Something gets in the way. So you go somewhere else. Years later, you remember the somewhere else. Not the place you originally intended to reach. I looked toward the dark trees. "Long way around." The forest didn't answer. It rarely did. I liked that about forests. Tomorrow I'd continue toward the coast. Probably. There was no reason not to. Unless, of course, I found one. And reasons had a peculiar habit of appearing once I started walking. Some Trails Are Traveled Alone, Some Trails Are Traveled Together

CHAPTER 3

What the Tide Leaves Behind

I went to the coast. This was worth mentioning because, occasionally, I actually go where I say I'm going. It keeps life unpredictable. The morning began under a ceiling of gray clouds that looked perfectly capable of rain but hadn't yet committed themselves to the idea. I packed camp, checked the ground, shouldered my backpack, and started west. The adventure novel went into the pack. I had stayed up later than intended reading it. The hero had survived the underground fortress. The rope had not. I still had serious concerns about his decision-making abilities.

The road carried me through forest for most of the morning. I walked. Stopped. Walked some more. There was no reason to hurry. The closer I came to the coast, the more the air changed. At first it was subtle, just something different beneath the smell of wet forest. Then I recognized it. Salt. I stopped in the road and breathed it in. "Getting closer." I'd seen oceans before. Many times. That didn't make this one less interesting. I've never understood the idea that seeing something once should somehow reduce the value of seeing it again. I've watched hundreds of sunsets. I still stop for them. I've walked through forests for longer than I can remember. I still look up. I've met thousands of people. I still enjoy meeting another. Familiarity doesn't have to make something ordinary. Sometimes it simply teaches you what to look for. The road curved. The forest opened. And somewhere beyond the trees, I heard the Pacific. I smiled. There you are.

I reached the coast shortly before noon. The first thing I did was nothing. I found a place where I could stand without interfering with anyone, took off my backpack, rested it beside me, and looked. The ocean stretched beneath the gray sky. Waves rolled toward shore in long uneven lines, breaking into white water against dark rocks. Sea stacks stood offshore, their shapes softened slightly by mist. Driftwood covered parts of the beach. Not little decorative pieces. Logs. Whole trees in some cases, bleached and battered by water. I took out my camera. Then stopped. Too soon. I put it back. There would be photographs. Probably. But first I wanted to see the place without looking through anything. So

I sat. A gull landed twenty feet away. It regarded me with the confident expression of a creature convinced that anything I possessed might potentially be food. “No.” The gull took one step closer. “I haven’t even taken lunch out.” Another step. “You people have a reputation.” The gull stared. I stared back. It won. I looked away first. “Fine.”

Before walking farther, I checked the local tide information I’d picked up. The ocean is beautiful. It is also entirely indifferent to whether you’ve correctly calculated when the beach you’re standing on will cease being beach. That seemed worth respecting. Coastal travel required different thinking from forest travel. Routes that were easy at low tide could become difficult or impossible later. Drift logs weren’t benches simply because they happened to resemble them, particularly when waves were reaching them. Slippery rocks remained committed to gravity. The sea didn’t become safe because it photographed well. I packed the tide information where I could reach it. Then I started down the beach. Walking on sand with a backpack is an excellent way to discover muscles that had previously chosen to remain anonymous. I stayed mostly on firmer ground. The gull followed for a while. Possibly still optimistic. Eventually it abandoned me for a family farther down the beach who had made the tactical error of possessing visible snacks. “Best of luck.” I wasn’t sure which side I meant.

The tide was going out. That opened sections of the shoreline that had been underwater earlier. Pools remained among the rocks. I slowed. Then stopped. Then forgot I had been going anywhere. Tide pools have that effect on me. At first glance, a rocky patch beside the ocean can look almost empty. Then you crouch. Suddenly there’s an entire neighborhood. Anemones. Mussels. Barnacles. Tiny movements in shallow water. Seaweed shifting with every surge. I kept my hands to myself. Looking didn’t require touching. My camera came out. This time I used it. One pool reflected the sky so clearly that the water nearly disappeared. Beneath the reflection, an anemone sat among dark rocks. I tried one angle. Too much glare. Another. Better. I waited for the water to settle after a small wave reached the pool. The surface became glass. Clouds appeared in the reflection. The anemone remained visible beneath them. Click. I checked the image. Interesting. I took another. The second was better. Keeper. I moved on.

Farther down the beach, I found a piece of driftwood shaped remarkably like a chair. I knew better. I sat on a smaller dry log well above the active surf instead. Lunch. Bread. Cheese. Dried fruit. And coffee from the thermos I’d filled that morning. The Pacific rolled in and out. I took out the adventure novel. The hero had now acquired a horse. This concerned me. The horse deserved better. I read three pages. Then a voice said, “Excuse me?” I looked up. A man stood nearby holding a

camera with a lens considerably larger than mine. “Sorry,” he said. “Do you mind if I ask what you’re shooting?” I glanced at the ocean. “Mostly whatever holds still long enough.” He laughed. He was perhaps my age. Then again, estimating my own age was complicated. He pointed toward the rocks. “Tide pools?” “Some.” “Birds?” “Only when they cooperate.” “So not birds.” “Exactly.” He smiled. He was waiting for something. I could tell. Not waiting for me to stop talking. Waiting for permission to continue. So I closed my book. That was enough. His name was Daniel. He photographed wildlife as a hobby and had come hoping to photograph shorebirds. He showed me several images on his camera. They were good. Very good. One showed a bird running along the edge of the surf, one foot barely touching the sand. “That one,” I said. “You like it?” “Looks like it’s late for something.” Daniel laughed. “That’s pretty much how they move.” He looked toward my camera. “Get anything good?” I showed him the tide pool. He studied it. “Nice reflection.” “Had to wait for the water to stop moving.” “How long?” “Not long.” “That’s the trick, isn’t it?” “What?” “Waiting.” I looked toward the ocean. “Sometimes.” We talked for a while. Not only about photography. Daniel had grown up inland. His father had brought him to the coast when he was a child. He’d hated the cold water, loved the birds, and apparently never recovered from either experience. He asked where I was from. “Depends how far back you’re asking.” “Where do you live?” “Mostly wherever I stop.” He looked at the backpack. “Seriously?” “Mostly.” “That sounds either amazing or exhausting.” “Yes.” He laughed. Eventually he excused himself when he spotted movement farther down the beach. I watched him hurry away with his camera. Then I reopened my book. The horse was still alive. Good.

I continued north along the beach as the tide dropped. Clouds moved overhead but never completely broke. That didn’t bother me. The muted light brought out details in the wet rocks that direct sunlight might have flattened. I photographed patterns in the sand left by retreating water. Not a keeper. A gull standing on a log. The gull turned away exactly as I pressed the shutter. Definitely not a keeper. A group of dark rocks with white water breaking around them. Maybe. I kept it for now. Deleting photographs immediately is a dangerous habit. Sometimes an image you don’t appreciate in the moment becomes more interesting later. Sometimes it’s simply bad. Time helps distinguish the two. I rounded a section of driftwood and nearly stepped on a shoe. I stopped. One shoe. Brown leather. Badly weathered. No laces. Half buried in sand. I stared at it. “Well.” The shoe had clearly been there for a while. I looked around. No second shoe. No obvious owner. Just driftwood, rocks and ocean. I crouched. It wasn’t particularly old in the historical sense. At least I didn’t think so. Water and weather could age things quickly. I took a photograph. Then another from farther back,

with the shoe small against the enormous beach. That was the better picture. One abandoned object. A whole coastline. I stood. My curiosity began suggesting possibilities. Most of them were dramatic. My common sense reminded my curiosity that shoes fall off boats, wash out of campsites, get lost, get thrown away and generally travel without requiring a mystery. “You’re no fun.” My common sense was accustomed to criticism. I left the shoe where it was.

The first problem arrived in the afternoon. It was not a major problem. It was barely even a problem. But it did involve a creek. Apparently water had decided that after yesterday’s bridge incident, we needed another conversation. A stream crossed the beach ahead of me. Near the ocean, it spread wide and shallow. Farther inland, it narrowed but deepened. I stopped. “You again.” The creek offered no indication that we’d met. I studied it. There were rocks. None particularly useful. A drift log stretched across part of the channel. No. Absolutely not. Wet driftwood above moving water had already submitted its application for Worst Idea of the Day. I walked inland. The creek narrowed. The banks became steeper. I walked back. I could remove my boots and wade the shallow section. Possible. I checked the tide. Still safe. I looked at the water. Then I noticed something twenty yards upstream. A natural buildup of gravel and stones created a much shallower crossing. I walked over. Tested it with my staff. Good. One step. Two. Three. My right boot slipped. I planted the staff. Recovered. Stopped. Water flowed around my boots. I looked down. “That was your one.” The creek behaved itself for the remainder of the crossing. I reached the other side dry above the ankles. Improvement.

Beyond the creek, the beach narrowed. I checked the time. Then the tide information. Then the coastline ahead. I could continue. But doing so would put me farther from my planned exit as the tide eventually turned. There was probably enough time. Probably. I smiled. “No.” I’d encountered that word enough recently. The coast would still be there tomorrow. I turned around.

Walking back revealed an entirely different beach. The light had changed. The water had moved. Things I’d passed earlier now looked unfamiliar from the opposite direction. That was another reason I enjoyed walking. Returning didn’t necessarily mean seeing the same thing twice. Near the creek, I found something I’d completely missed. A piece of driftwood. Small. Maybe two feet long. Twisted roots emerged from one end. From one angle it looked like nothing. From another, the roots resembled a hand reaching out of the sand. I stopped. Camera. One photograph. Too obvious. I moved lower. The ocean disappeared from the frame. No. I moved higher. Now the roots pointed toward the sea. Better. A wave came in behind it. Click. I checked the image. Not quite.

Another wave. Smaller. Wait. The next surged farther up the beach, leaving a thin sheet of water around the wood. For several seconds the wet sand reflected both the roots and the sky. Click. There. Keeper. I stood. “Thank you.” The driftwood remained humble about its contribution.

By late afternoon, I left the beach and followed a road toward the camping area I’d chosen. I was tired. Not exhausted. The satisfying kind of tired. The kind that makes taking off a backpack feel like a reward you’ve been carrying all day. The camping area wasn’t crowded. I chose a suitable spot, set up, and changed into dry socks. There are luxuries in life that receive insufficient appreciation. Dry socks belong near the top. I made dinner. Then I sat with my camera. I reviewed the day’s photographs. Tide pool. Keeper. Rocks and surf. Maybe. Gull butt. Delete. I paused. Looked at it again. The gull had turned at precisely the wrong moment. Its wings were slightly lifted and its head was completely hidden. I laughed. “Actually...” Keep. Not every photograph needed to be good. Some deserved survival for other reasons. The shoe. Interesting. Driftwood roots. Keeper. I went back to the gull. Definitely keeping that. I took out the postcard I’d bought yesterday. The coastline printed on it looked considerably more dramatic than what I’d seen today. Golden sunset. Perfect waves. Clouds arranged with suspicious cooperation. I compared it with the gray sky beyond the trees. “Show-off.” I put it back.

After dinner, I walked a short distance to a safe overlook above the beach. I left the camera at camp. Deliberately. The sky had begun to darken. Waves moved below. No photograph. No waiting for the light. No thinking about composition. I just watched. A couple stood farther down the overlook. They spoke quietly to one another. Another person walked a dog along a nearby path where dogs were permitted. The animal stopped every few feet to investigate something its owner apparently considered far less interesting. I smiled. The dog discovered a bush. The bush required extensive research. The owner waited. Eventually they continued. I watched until they disappeared. Then I turned back toward camp.

The next morning arrived brighter. Not sunny. Brighter. There is a difference. I packed slowly. I had no firm destination for the day. There was another stretch of coastline I could explore. A town farther north. A trail inland. And, somewhere in the back of my mind, the little historical collection I’d heard about two days earlier. I hadn’t forgotten it. I just hadn’t gone there yet. There was no deadline. History was patient. Mostly. I shouldered my backpack. Before leaving, I looked toward the coast one more time. Then I started walking.

The trail inland climbed through forest. Within half an hour, the sound of the ocean had faded. The smell of salt lingered a little longer.

Then that faded too. I stopped once to photograph sunlight beginning to filter through the trees. I raised the camera. Waited. Nothing happened. The light flattened. I lowered it. “Not today.” I continued. Around midday I reached a small roadside area with a few buildings. I bought coffee. Of course. Outside, a community notice board stood beneath a little wooden roof. Local events. A missing bicycle. Firewood for sale. A handwritten advertisement for guitar lessons. A flyer for a historical talk. I stopped. Read it. The talk had happened three weeks ago. “Typical.” Below it was another notice. LOCAL HISTORICAL COLLECTION Hours listed beneath. I checked the day. Open. I checked the time. Also open. I drank my coffee. The collection was less than a mile away. “Well.” Apparently history had become impatient.

It occupied two rooms inside an older municipal building. I stepped through the door. A woman behind a desk looked up from a stack of papers. “Good afternoon.” “Afternoon.” “First time in?” “Yes.” “Let me know if you have any questions.” “I probably will.” She smiled. “Most people don’t warn me.” I started with the nearest display. Old photographs. Logging equipment. Maps. A case containing household objects. A school photograph where every child looked deeply suspicious of the photographer. I took my time. There was no reason not to. One wall displayed material about travel through the peninsula during the nineteenth century. That caught me. Naturally. I moved closer. Maps. Expedition accounts. Old routes. A reproduction of a photograph. Riverbank. Trees. A rough trail. Two distant figures. I leaned closer. There was nothing spectacular about it. The composition was competent. The exposure surprisingly good considering its age. But what interested me was the photographer. The image hadn’t been centered on the people. They were small. Almost incidental. The trail occupied more of the frame. So did the trees. The photographer had apparently wanted the viewer to understand not merely who was there, but where they were. I liked that. I read the caption. River crossing, Olympic Peninsula, 1890. Then the attribution. E. Mercer. I stared at the name. Nothing. Never heard of him. Beside the photograph was a reproduction of a handwritten journal fragment. I read it. Then read it again. The writer described traveling through country that his maps represented poorly. He mentioned that people already living in the region understood the rivers, trails and terrain far better than anything drawn on his paper. That caught my attention more than the photograph. I looked at the attribution again. “E. Mercer.” I glanced toward the woman at the desk. She was still working. I could ask. I didn’t. Not yet. Instead I studied the photograph again. I found myself wondering where Mercer had stood. What camera he’d used. How long the exposure had been. Why he’d chosen that framing. Why those two people were so small. What had been just outside the image. Photographers do that. We look at

photographs and occasionally become more interested in the person behind the camera than the thing in front of it. Eventually I moved to the next display. Then another. Twenty minutes later I was reading about something entirely different. By the time I left, I had learned several things I hadn't known when I entered. That made it a successful visit. Outside, I adjusted my backpack. The afternoon was still young. I started walking. After a few steps, I stopped. "E. Mercer." I waited. Still nothing. Just a name. I shrugged. Then continued down the road. There were thousands of names in history. Some became famous. Most didn't. Some survived in photographs. Some in journals. Some carved into old guardrails beside forgotten roads. And some disappeared completely. I had no reason to think E. Mercer would be any different. So I kept walking. The name stayed behind. At least, that's what I thought. Some Trails Are Traveled Alone, Some Trails Are Traveled Together

CHAPTER 4

The Trail That Wasn't There

The historical collection opened at ten. At ten seventeen, I was several miles away walking in the opposite direction. This wasn't because I had lost interest. I'd spent most of the previous afternoon there, and there were several displays I wouldn't have minded looking through again. There was also a binder near the back that I'd somehow missed until five minutes before closing. That bothered me. Not enough to turn around. But enough that I knew I'd probably be back. Eventually. That was the nice thing about traveling without an itinerary. You could leave things unfinished. There was no rule saying curiosity had to be satisfied immediately. Besides, I'd already learned something useful from the visit. E. Mercer had taken a decent photograph. I had no idea who E. Mercer was. These two facts were not presently causing me any distress. So I walked.

The morning had done something unusual. It wasn't raining. I distrusted this immediately. The sky wasn't clear, exactly. Clouds still stretched across most of it, but they were higher and thinner than they'd been for the last several days. Occasionally sunlight reached the road. Actual sunlight. I stopped the first time it happened. A bright patch moved across the pavement and climbed the trunks beside me. "Well, look who's finally decided to show up." The sun disappeared behind another cloud. "Brief visit." I continued. My plan, such as it was, involved following a road inland for several miles and then taking a trail I'd noticed on a local map. I didn't know anything particularly interesting about the trail. That was part of the appeal. Famous trails have expectations attached to them. Views you're supposed to photograph. Landmarks you're supposed to admire. Places everyone tells you not to miss. There is nothing wrong with any of that. But sometimes I like a trail because nobody has told me what I'm supposed to find there. This one appeared to climb through forest, skirt a low ridge and eventually reconnect with another road farther south. Perfect. A few hours of walking. Maybe lunch somewhere along the way. Then I'd decide what happened next. I stopped beside a small market before leaving the settled area. Coffee. Naturally. I also replenished a few food

supplies and bought an apple. The apple was enormous. I held it up. “Ambitious.” The cashier looked at me. “Sorry?” “Nothing.” She glanced at the apple. “Those are good.” “I was hoping so.” “They’re from over near Wenatchee.” I turned it over in my hand. “That’s traveled farther today than I have.” She smiled. “Probably.” I paid, packed everything carefully and stepped outside. The apple went into an exterior pocket where it could be reached easily. I walked perhaps fifty feet. Then stopped. I moved the apple. Exterior pockets are convenient. They are also where apples go to become applesauce against rocks. Some lessons only need to be learned once. Others apparently need occasional refresher courses.

The trailhead was exactly where the map indicated. This was encouraging. The trail was not. I stood beside the road. There was a sign. There was a small parking area. There was even a weathered information board. Beyond that was forest. I looked left. Forest. Right. Forest. Straight ahead. More forest. “Hmm.” I walked to the information board. A faded map showed the trail beginning approximately twelve feet from where I stood. I turned around. The forest remained committed to its position. I found what might have been an opening between some shrubs. Three steps in, it became obvious that it was not a trail. I backed out. Another opening looked more promising. That one lasted twenty feet before ending at a fallen tree surrounded by vegetation. I returned to the sign. The sign and I considered one another. “You seem confident.” It offered no further assistance. I took out my map. According to it, there was definitely a trail. According to the ground, the map had been engaging in creative writing. I walked around the edge of the parking area. Then I noticed something half-hidden beneath moss and salal. A wooden post. No sign attached. Just a post. Beyond it, if I looked carefully, I could see a shallow depression beneath the vegetation. Maybe. I stepped closer. There. A faint line. Not much. But enough. “Found you.”

For the first quarter mile, the trail existed primarily as a rumor. I followed depressions in the ground, occasional cut branches, old drainage features and the subtle differences between forest that had been walked through and forest that hadn’t. The camera stayed packed. This was navigation time. Eventually the route became clearer. Someone had maintained portions of it in the past, but not recently. Fallen branches lay across the path. Moss softened old cuts in logs. It wasn’t impassable. It simply required attention. I liked it. The trail climbed gradually. The road sounds disappeared behind me. Soon there was only forest. My boots. Birds. Occasional water. And the soft tap of my staff against the ground. I stopped beside an enormous tree. Not because it was the largest tree I’d ever seen. Not because it had an unusual shape. I stopped because of a tiny wooden sign nailed to a post beside it.

The sign read: TRAIL □ The arrow pointed directly into the tree. I stared. The tree had clearly grown where the trail once passed, or the trail had moved, or the sign had shifted, or somebody with an unusual sense of humor had been involved. I looked in the direction of the arrow. Bark. "Excellent." The actual trail curved around the trunk. I took out the camera. This deserved documentation. I framed the sign and enough of the tree to make the problem obvious. Click. I checked it. Good. Then I took a second from slightly farther back. Better. Keeper. I put the camera away. "Thank you for your assistance." The sign continued pointing confidently into several tons of wood.

The trail grew easier beyond the tree. Sunlight appeared more often. Every time the clouds opened, patches of forest brightened and then faded again. I walked slowly enough to watch it happen. A little before noon, I heard water. Not another creek crossing. I hoped. I'd had enough negotiations with water for one week. The sound grew louder. I followed the trail around a bend and found a small cascade dropping over dark rock beside the path. Not a waterfall worth putting on a tourist brochure. Maybe eight or ten feet. Water spread across the rock rather than dropping cleanly, separating into dozens of little channels before gathering in a pool below. I stopped. The camera came out. Obvious photograph first. Vertical composition. Water centered. Pretty. Boring. I lowered the camera. "You're better than that." I wasn't sure whether I meant the waterfall or myself. I walked around. A fallen log crossed the foreground from one angle. Too cluttered. From another, ferns framed the water. Better. I crouched. The water became more prominent. I stood again. Then the sun came out. Bright light hit the falling water. Awful. Every highlight turned harsh. I waited. The cloud returned. Soft light. Much better. I adjusted the camera. Slower shutter. Not too slow. I didn't want the water transformed into white fog. I wanted movement. I steadied myself. Click. I checked the image. Close. Another. Click. That was better. I waited for a small gust to stop moving the fern nearest the frame. Click. There. Keeper. I put the camera away. Then I sat beside the trail and ate the apple. It was good. The cashier had not deceived me. I considered this another successful encounter with civilization.

The trail climbed more steeply after lunch. Eventually I reached the ridge. Calling it a ridge made it sound more impressive than it was. There were no dramatic cliffs. No sweeping panorama. Mostly trees. A few openings offered glimpses of distant mountains. I stopped at one. The mountains were partially hidden by clouds. Again. I looked. Camera stayed put. I'd taken that photograph already. Not literally. But close enough. So I kept walking. A few minutes later, something small moved beside the trail. I stopped. Nothing. Then a tiny brown shape emerged

from beneath a fern. A mouse. It froze. I froze. We regarded each other. The mouse had the expression of someone who had opened the wrong door during an important meeting. Slowly, I reached for the camera. The mouse disappeared. “Understandable.” I waited. Nothing. I continued walking. Ten steps later, I heard movement behind me. I turned. Nothing. “Very good.” Apparently I was being stalked by approximately three ounces of wildlife.

The first real surprise came on the descent. I found another sign. This one was newer. It stood at a junction. The problem was that I had no junction on my map. I stopped. One trail continued downhill. Another went left. The sign identified the left trail by name. I checked the map. No such trail. I checked the sign. Then the map. “This relationship is deteriorating.” The trail I had intended to follow should continue downhill and eventually reach the road. Probably. There was that word. I looked at the unmarked route to the left. It was in much better condition. Someone was clearly using it. I could simply follow my original route. Or I could find out where the new one went. I took a drink of water. Then checked the time. Plenty of daylight. Weather stable. Supplies good. I studied the terrain. The left trail appeared to curve gradually in the same general direction I ultimately wanted to travel. I made a decision. Left.

For perhaps fifteen minutes, the new trail behaved perfectly. Then it began heading north. I wanted south. I noticed. I continued anyway. Sometimes trails curve. Another ten minutes. Still north. “You’re testing the limits of my optimism.” I checked my map. Nothing. No trail. No landmark. No useful explanation. I could turn around. That would be sensible. I looked ahead. The trail continued through open forest. Well maintained. No warning signs. No closures. And I could still easily retrace my route. So I gave it another ten minutes. At minute eight, I found the cabin.

“Cabin” was generous. Four walls. Mostly. Roof. Technically. Door. Missing. It sat in a small clearing surrounded by trees. I stopped at the edge. The structure was old. Not ancient. Weathered boards had gone gray. Moss covered part of the roof. One side leaned enough that I suspected gravity had begun a long-term project. I didn’t go inside. There was no need. Old structures can be unstable, privately owned, historically significant, inhabited by wildlife, or all four. I stayed outside. There was no sign. No marker. No explanation. Just the building. I walked around the clearing without approaching too closely. On the far side, I found the remains of something else. A low line of stones. Foundation, maybe. Nearby stood an old metal barrel collapsed inward with rust. I took out the camera. The cabin looked too obvious straight on. I moved until a tree partially obscured it. Better. It looked discovered

rather than displayed. I waited for the light. Nothing dramatic happened. That was fine. The clouds softened everything. Click. I moved slightly. A fern occupied the foreground. Click. Second one. Keeper. Then I photographed the stone foundation. Probably not a keeper. The barrel. Definitely not. I deleted neither. I put the camera away. Then I noticed the carving. It was on one of the trees near the clearing. Not words. Not initials. A simple shape cut into the bark. A rectangle with a line through it. Old enough that the tree had begun growing around the wound. I leaned closer without touching it. Could mean something. Could mean nothing. Survey mark. Logging mark. Somebody bored with a knife. I photographed it. Mostly because I knew I'd wonder about it later. Then I returned to the trail.

The trail continued beyond the cabin. I did not. That seemed like a reasonable place to end the experiment. I had no idea where the route went. I knew where I'd come from. So I turned around. The cabin disappeared behind the trees within a minute. By the time I reached the junction again, it felt strangely unlikely that it had been there at all. I checked the sign. Nothing about a cabin. Nothing about history. Just a trail name. I took a photograph of the sign. Reference, not art. Then I followed my original route downhill.

The road appeared exactly where the map said it would. I was almost disappointed. I stepped onto pavement. "Look at you, being accurate." The map accepted my apology. The afternoon was getting late. I had several miles before the camping area I'd identified, but the road was easy walking. I settled into a steady pace. About a mile later, a pickup slowed beside me. The driver lowered the window. Older man. Baseball cap. White beard. "You all right?" "Yep." "Need a ride?" "No, thank you." He looked at my pack. "Long way to the next campground." "I've got time." He nodded. "All right." He started to pull away. "Actually," I said. He stopped. "Know anything about an old cabin up that trail?" I pointed back. He frowned. "What cabin?" That was promising. I described the junction. Then the clearing. His expression changed. "Little falling-down place?" "That's the one." "Haven't thought about that in years." I walked closer to the truck but stayed off the road. "What was it?" He scratched his beard. "Not sure. My dad said somebody used to live up there. Or maybe work up there." "Logging?" "Could've been." "Mining?" "Not much of that around there that I know of." "Homestead?" He shrugged. "Maybe." Excellent. We had successfully narrowed it down to somebody doing something at some point. "Know how old it is?" "Nope." "Who owned it?" "Nope." "Why there's a trail going to it?" "Nope." I nodded. "You're a wealth of information." He laughed. "Sorry." "No, this is good." "How?" "Now I know you don't know." He stared at me for a second. Then laughed harder. "I suppose that's something."

"It is." He looked back toward the trail. "There's a guy named Earl who might know. Lives down toward the next town. Used to work timber. Knows every old road in the county." "Bookstore?" The man frowned. "What?" "Nothing." Apparently not the same man. He gave me a rough description of where I might find Earl if I happened to pass through. I didn't write it down. Not because I wasn't interested. Because I wasn't going there. At least not deliberately. The driver wished me luck and continued down the road. I resumed walking.

I reached camp with about an hour of daylight remaining. My shoulders were ready to stop. My feet had already submitted the paperwork. I set up camp. Changed socks. Made dinner. Coffee followed. Then I took out the camera. I reviewed the photographs. Trail sign pointing into tree. Keeper. Waterfall. Keeper. Cabin. Keeper. Carving. Interesting. The photograph of the cabin held my attention longest. It wasn't a spectacular image. Gray wood. Green forest. A dark empty doorway. But the angle made it feel as though the building had been hiding and I'd caught it. I liked that. I zoomed in slightly. Something was attached to the wall near the doorway. I hadn't noticed it while I was there. I enlarged the image. A small rectangle. Maybe metal. Maybe wood. Impossible to tell. "Well." I considered going back tomorrow. Then laughed. "No." There were limits. I had seen a cabin. Not uncovered the lost city of Atlantis. I closed the camera. The little rectangle could remain mysterious.

I read after dinner. The adventure novel's hero had lost the horse. I was relieved. Presumably the horse had made better choices. The story continued without it. After a few chapters, I marked my page. The forest around camp was quiet. No ocean tonight. No rushing creek. Just occasional wind moving through branches. I thought about the trail that wasn't on my map. The cabin nobody seemed to know much about. The mark on the tree. The little rectangle in the photograph. Interesting things. Nothing more. Not everything needed solving. I was comfortable with unanswered questions. You had to be if you traveled. Otherwise every side road became an obligation. Every old building became an investigation. Every unfamiliar name became a mystery. I paused. E. Mercer. The name surfaced for no particular reason. I frowned. Where had that come from? Yesterday's photograph. That was all. I picked up my book again. The hero had apparently decided to enter a cave. "Don't." He entered the cave. I shook my head. "Some people never learn." I continued reading.

Rain arrived sometime after midnight. I woke briefly to the sound. Then went back to sleep. By morning it had stopped. I made breakfast beneath dripping trees and packed my things. When I picked up my camera, I considered the cabin photograph one more time. Then I put the camera away. I didn't go back. Instead, I followed the road south.

By noon, the cabin was several miles behind me. By afternoon, I was thinking about other things. A strange bird call. A roadside stand selling berries. A section of river I'd like to photograph if the light improved. The possibility of finding somewhere to trade my book once the hero finished making poor decisions. The trail behind me became just another trail. The cabin became just another photograph. And E. Mercer remained just another name. For the moment, that was all any of them needed to be. Some Trails Are Traveled Alone, Some Trails Are Traveled Together

CHAPTER 5

The Things People Leave Behind

I finished the adventure novel over breakfast. The hero survived. Against considerable odds. Most of those odds had been created by the hero. I closed the book and studied the cover. “Well.” A man wielding a sword stood dramatically on a cliff while lightning split the sky behind him. Nothing remotely resembling this scene had occurred in the book. I turned it over. “Somebody in the art department had ambitions.” Still, I’d enjoyed it. That presented a problem. Not an emotional one. A weight problem. I opened my backpack and looked at the books already inside. The regional history was staying. One other battered favorite was staying. The adventure novel had completed its journey with me. I slipped it into an outer section of the pack. “Time for you to become somebody else’s problem.” Then I finished my coffee.

The road south was quiet. Yesterday’s clouds had thinned overnight, and the morning sunlight came through the trees in long uneven patches. For once, I didn’t photograph it. I’d taken plenty of forest photographs recently. Besides, there was walking to do. Not that I had anywhere particularly important to go. I’d marked a few possibilities on my map. There was a town several miles away where I could replenish supplies. Beyond that, I could continue south, turn east, or eventually work my way back toward the coast. The historical collection remained behind me. So did the old cabin. So did E. Mercer. I hadn’t thought much about any of them since yesterday. Mostly. There was still that little rectangle beside the cabin door. I had enlarged the photograph again over breakfast. Still couldn’t tell what it was. So I stopped looking. There is a fine line between curiosity and staring at pixels until you invent information. I knew the line existed because I’d crossed it before. Several times. I walked.

A few miles later, I found a shoe. This was becoming concerning. It sat beside the road. A sneaker this time. Blue. Relatively new. No foot attached. Always encouraging. I stopped. “You aren’t mine.” The shoe

didn't dispute this. I looked around. No second shoe. I thought about the weathered one I'd photographed on the beach. Two abandoned shoes in several days. Different shoes. Different places. Completely unrelated. Obviously. I took one step. Stopped. "No." I kept walking. Twenty feet. My camera remained in the pack. "Absolutely not." Another twenty. I sighed. Then I turned around and photographed the shoe. One picture. Nothing artistic. Evidence of my deteriorating standards. I returned the camera to my pack. "If I find a third one, we're having a conversation." With whom, I had no idea.

The town appeared gradually. First houses. Then a gas station. A diner. A small grocery store. A laundromat. I stopped. There are certain things travelers learn to appreciate that people with permanent homes rarely celebrate. Reliable hot water. Electrical outlets. A chair with a back. And laundromats. I adjusted my pack. "Beautiful." A woman walking past looked at me. I pointed toward the building. "Laundry." She nodded slowly. "Okay." I went inside.

An hour later, my clothes were clean, my devices were charged, and I had acquired a cup of coffee from the diner next door. Civilization had once again justified itself. While the dryer finished, I sat beside the window with my regional history book. A man across the room was folding towels. A woman was trying to convince a child that the laundry cart was not a vehicle. The child disagreed. Strongly. I read. The Olympic Peninsula's recorded history was filled with layers that didn't always fit neatly together. Indigenous communities had lived throughout the region for thousands of years, with distinct relationships to the coast, rivers and interior. Much later came explorers, settlers, logging operations, roads and towns. Each new layer left evidence behind. Sometimes obvious. Sometimes not. I thought about the abandoned road from two days earlier. Then the cabin. Then I realized I was doing it again. I turned the page. The child successfully entered the laundry cart. The negotiations had failed. I respected the commitment.

When my clothes were finished, I packed them and crossed the street to the diner. I hadn't planned to eat there. Then I smelled something involving potatoes. Plans changed. I took a booth near the window. A server approached with a menu. "Coffee?" I lifted the cup I'd already purchased from them earlier. "Still working on it." She looked at the cup. "That one's cold." "It has character." "It has been sitting in a laundromat for an hour." "Also true." She took it. "I'll bring you another." I didn't object. The new coffee was considerably better. I ordered eggs, potatoes, toast and enough food to make carrying lunch for the next several hours unnecessary. My backpack sat against the wall beside me. The adventure novel was still inside. I asked the server when she returned. "Any used bookstores around here?" She thought. "Not anymore." "Tragic."

"There used to be one." "What happened?" "Owner retired." "Understandable. Still tragic." She pointed through the window. "Library's two blocks down." That didn't solve my book problem. Libraries generally expected books back. I was unreliable in that particular category. "Anything like a book exchange?" "There's one outside the community center." That was promising. "Thank you." She started away. Then turned back. "You looking for something specific?" "Trying to get rid of something." She looked at me. I realized how that sounded. "A book." "Oh." "I finished it." She smiled. "Community center." "Excellent."

The book exchange was a wooden cabinet mounted beneath a small shelter. TAKE A BOOK • LEAVE A BOOK I opened it. Mysteries. Romance novels. Two cookbooks. A biography. Several children's books. A field guide. Three books whose covers had been faded almost completely white by the sun. I took out my adventure novel. "This is where we part." I put it on the shelf. Then I made the mistake of looking at the other books. "No." I closed the door. Then opened it again. The field guide concerned Pacific Northwest plants. I picked it up. Useful. Interesting. Compact. I checked the weight in my hand. "You're making a compelling argument." The exchange rules were clear. I'd left a book. I could take one. I opened the field guide. Someone had written inside the front cover. For anyone curious enough to stop and look. No name. I smiled. "Well played." The field guide went into my pack. I closed the cabinet. The adventure novel remained behind. Somebody else would find it. Maybe they'd enjoy it. Maybe they'd spend three hundred pages questioning the hero's survival instincts. Either way, it wasn't my problem anymore.

I replenished supplies before leaving town. Food. Coffee. A few basic necessities. Water. I always paid attention to water, even in country where streams and rain seemed abundant. Water on a map wasn't necessarily water you should drink. Water you could see wasn't necessarily water you should drink without treatment. And a stream that existed last year didn't sign a contract promising to be there today. I carried what I needed and had a way to treat more. Walking taught you quickly that thirst was heavier than water. I packed everything carefully. My backpack was fuller now. Not uncomfortably. Just enough that I noticed. Then I started out of town.

The road followed a river for several miles. The afternoon had become unexpectedly bright. Sunlight flashed on the water between the trees. I stopped once. Camera out. Looked. Put it away. Pretty. Not a photograph. At least not mine. A mile later, I stopped again. This time the river curved away from the road. An old fence ran along the bank, several posts leaning at different angles. Beyond it, the water reflected the trees. One post had almost completely collapsed. A small plant was

growing from its cracked top. I looked at it. That was more interesting. I stepped safely off the road. Camera. The first composition included too much fence. The second made the plant disappear against the forest. I moved farther left. Now the broken post stood against the reflected sky in the river. Better. I waited. A breeze moved the leaves. Waited. Still. Click. I checked it. Good. Another. Click. First was better. Keeper. I put the camera away. The mountains could wait. Apparently today belonged to small plants growing out of things.

Farther along, I found a roadside produce stand. Nobody was there. A handwritten sign listed prices. A metal box accepted payment. Berries. Apples. A few vegetables. And jam. I stopped. There are dangerous places in this world. Cliffs. Flooded rivers. Unstable buildings. Unattended roadside stands containing homemade jam. I picked up a jar. Blackberry. I looked at my backpack. The backpack looked back. "No." I put the jar down. Then noticed the small jars. "That's dirty." I bought one. I also bought berries. I paid the listed amount and added a little extra because I didn't have exact change. As I was putting the berries away, a voice called from the house behind the stand. "You can take another basket!" I looked over. An older woman stood on the porch. "I only paid for one." "You paid too much." "That's because I don't have change." "Then take another." "I have to carry them." She considered my backpack. "Then take another jam." This negotiation was moving in an unfortunate direction. "I appreciate it." She came down from the porch. "Walking?" "Yes." "How far?" I considered the question. "Today?" She laughed. "Sure." "Not sure yet." "Where'd you start?" "Today?" She laughed again. "All right, I see how this works." She introduced herself as Ruth. We talked beside the stand. She and her husband had lived there for more than thirty years. The berries came from their property. The jam was hers. She asked about the camera. I told her I liked taking photographs. "People?" "Sometimes." "Landscapes?" "Sometimes." "What do you take pictures of?" "Things I want to remember." She nodded. That seemed to satisfy her. Then she pointed toward the back of the property. "You like old things?" Dangerous question. "Usually." "There's an old truck back there." Of course there was.

The truck hadn't moved in decades. Maybe longer. It sat beyond a weathered shed where grass and blackberry vines had grown around the wheels. The paint had once been green. Now it was mostly rust, faded color and moss. One headlight was missing. The windshield was cloudy. A young sapling had grown up beside the front bumper. I stopped. "Oh, you're wonderful." Ruth laughed. "My husband keeps saying he's going to do something with it." "How long has he been saying that?" "Twenty-seven years." "So there's still time." "Apparently." I asked before photographing it. "Go ahead." I walked around the truck.

Straight-on was too much. Side view was better. Then I noticed the passenger window. The glass was still intact. It reflected the trees. Inside the cab, the steering wheel was visible beneath decades of dust. Outside, blackberry vines crossed the door. I framed the shot. Old truck. Forest reflected in glass. Vines reclaiming metal. I waited for a cloud to soften the sunlight. Click. I checked it. Keeper. Then I stepped back and took one wider photograph showing the entire truck disappearing into vegetation. Also good. Different story. I kept both. Ruth watched. “What do you see?” I lowered the camera. “A truck.” She laughed. “I walked into that.” “A little.” “No, really.” I looked at the vehicle again. “Something that used to go places.” She became quiet. Then nodded. “My husband drove it when we first bought the place.” “Really?” “Before we were married.” She walked closer but didn’t touch it. “We took that thing everywhere.” There was a different expression on her face now. Not sadness exactly. Memory. I didn’t photograph that. Some moments belong to the person having them. She told me about the truck instead. Trips. Breakdowns. A camping trip where they’d forgotten tent poles. The time the truck refused to start until a stranger hit something under the hood with a wrench. I listened. The photograph became more interesting with every story. Not because the truck changed. Because now I knew where it had been.

Before I left, Ruth insisted I take another small jar of jam. I objected. She ignored me. The jam entered my backpack. Apparently democracy had failed. She also refilled one of my water bottles. I thanked her. “Come by again if you’re ever through here.” “I might.” “You don’t know where you’re going.” “That’s why I might.” She smiled. “Fair enough.” I started walking. After perhaps a hundred yards, I looked back. Ruth was rearranging baskets at the stand. The old truck wasn’t visible from the road. I thought about taking another photograph. I didn’t. I kept walking.

I found camp farther along the river. Nothing spectacular. A legal campsite with trees, water nearby and enough flat ground to make sleeping uncomplicated. That was plenty. I set up. Dinner involved bread, cheese, something from a packet, berries and blackberry jam. The jam was excellent. I stared at the jar. “Fine. You were worth the weight.” After eating, I opened the field guide. The anonymous inscription was still there. For anyone curious enough to stop and look. I read for a while. Then I took out my camera. Today’s photographs. The shoe. I stared at it. “Why?” Keep. The fence post. Keeper. The truck window. Definitely. Wide truck. Also. Then I reached the picture of the book exchange I’d apparently taken without consciously considering it important. I’d forgotten about that. The adventure novel was visible

behind the little glass door. So were all the books waiting around it. I enlarged the image. A reflection crossed the glass. My own silhouette was faintly visible. Fedora. Camera. Backpack. Not enough detail to make it a portrait. Just evidence that I'd been standing there. I studied it. Then smiled. Keeper.

The sun dropped behind the trees. No spectacular sunset. No dramatic weather. I didn't mind. I read until the light became poor. Then I sat beside the small fire I'd built where conditions and rules allowed. The river moved somewhere beyond the trees. I thought about Ruth's truck. Something that used to go places. That wasn't entirely right. The truck still had a journey. It just wasn't moving anymore. Its paint was fading. Plants were growing around it. Someone could look at it and see junk. Ruth looked at it and saw twenty-seven years ago. I looked at it and saw a photograph. Same truck. Different story. I liked that.

Sometime after dark, another camper arrived at a nearby site. I heard a vehicle. Doors. Quiet conversation. Then laughter. I continued reading. Later, as I was preparing to put the book away, someone approached along the edge of my campsite. Not close enough to intrude. Just enough to be seen. A man raised one hand. "Hey." "Evening." "Sorry to bother you. You have a lighter?" "No." He looked toward my fire. Then back at me. I looked at the fire. "Fair question." I reached into my gear. "I have matches." "That works." I handed him a few. "Thanks." He hesitated. "You're traveling on foot?" "Mostly." "Where you headed?" "Tomorrow?" He laughed. "Let me guess. You don't know." "You're catching on." He introduced himself as Marcus. His wife, Elena, called something from their campsite. He turned. "Apparently I've been sent to invite you over for coffee." I looked at my book. Then toward their camp. "Coffee?" "That's what she said." "Well, it would be rude to create an international incident." He stared. "International?" "I don't know where you're from." He laughed. "Seattle." "Then we're probably safe." I marked my page.

They had two camp chairs. Marcus brought a third from their vehicle. Elena handed me coffee. Good coffee. This improved negotiations immediately. They were traveling for their anniversary. Fifteen years. No elaborate destination. Just several days driving around the peninsula, stopping wherever seemed interesting. "I understand the philosophy," I said. They asked about my travels. I told them some stories. Not all. Nobody wants all. Then I asked about theirs. That lasted considerably longer. Elena was a teacher. Marcus repaired elevators. I had never met anyone who repaired elevators. This was immediately interesting. "What's the strangest thing you've found in one?" Marcus thought. "Elevator or shaft?" "Those are apparently different categories." "Very." Elena sighed. "You've done it now." For the next half hour I learned considerably more about elevators than I'd expected to know when I woke

that morning. It was wonderful. People are like that. Ask the right question and an ordinary stranger becomes an expert on a world you've never considered. Marcus knew elevators. Elena knew children. Ruth knew berries and thirty years of one piece of land. The bookstore owner knew forgotten roads. Daniel knew birds. Everybody carried something. You just had to give them room to unpack it. Eventually the conversation slowed. Not awkwardly. Naturally. I finished my coffee. "Thank you." Elena smiled. "For the coffee?" "That too." They didn't ask what else I meant. I liked them for that. I returned to my campsite.

Before sleeping, I wrote a few things down. Not a journal exactly. I've never been consistent enough to call it that. Names. Places. Details I didn't want to lose. Ruth. Blackberry jam. Old green truck. Twenty-seven years. Marcus and Elena. Fifteen years. Elevators. Then, for reasons I couldn't quite explain, I turned back several pages. There it was. A note from the historical collection. I'd written it almost absentmindedly. E. Mercer. Photographer. 1890. River crossing. I stared at it. Three words bothered me. Not the name. Not the date. River crossing. I thought about the photograph. Two people in the distance. Trail. Trees. River. Something about the framing. I couldn't remember exactly what. I closed the notebook. "Doesn't matter." I put it away. Then I lay down. The river moved in the darkness. Somewhere nearby, Marcus laughed at something Elena said. Farther away, a vehicle passed along the road. Then everything became quiet again.

Morning came cold and clear. I made coffee. Packed camp. Marcus and Elena were still asleep when I left, so I didn't disturb them. I shouldered my backpack. It was slightly heavier than yesterday. Field guide. Supplies. Jam. Memories don't weigh anything. Fortunately. I started walking. After a few minutes, I reached a bend in the road where sunlight was beginning to reach the river. Mist hovered above the water. I stopped. The camera came out. I framed the obvious photograph. River. Mist. Morning light. Beautiful. I lowered the camera. Waited. A bird flew across. Too fast. The mist shifted. Sunlight moved through it. I raised the camera again. Then something happened. Not dramatic. Not extraordinary. On the opposite bank, two hikers emerged from the trees. They stopped beside the water. One pointed upstream. The other unfolded a map. I froze. Not because I knew them. I didn't. Not because anything was wrong. Nothing was. It was simply the arrangement. Two figures. River. Trees. One of them holding a map. For a moment, I saw another photograph. Old. Black and white. Two distant people standing near a river crossing. I lowered my camera without taking the picture. "E. Mercer." This time the name didn't disappear. I stood there while the hikers across the river moved on. Then I packed the camera away. The photograph could wait. I had a historical collection to revisit. I turned around.

For once, I knew exactly where I was going. Some Trails Are Traveled Alone, Some Trails Are Traveled Together

CHAPTER 6

A Different Angle

I made it almost half a mile before realizing I was going the wrong way. This was especially impressive because, for once, I actually knew where I wanted to go. I stopped. Looked at the road. Looked at the map. Turned the map around. Turned it back. “No.” The map was correct. This was disappointing. Usually I preferred when the map and I could share responsibility. I turned around. Apparently my dramatic declaration about knowing exactly where I was going had survived until the first intersection. Still, improvement was improvement. I headed back toward the historical collection.

The morning mist hadn’t completely burned away. It hung low over the river, drifting in thin patches above the water. Sunlight had begun working through it, illuminating some sections while leaving others gray. Yesterday I would have stopped. Actually, yesterday I had stopped. I’d been standing beside this same river when two hikers appeared on the opposite bank. Two people. Trees. Water. A map. For just a moment, the scene had reminded me of E. Mercer’s photograph. That was why I was walking back. Not because I’d uncovered a mystery. I hadn’t. Not because I thought the photograph contained some great secret. It probably didn’t. Something had simply bothered me about the composition. And apparently that was enough to make me walk several miles in the wrong direction. Twice, if you counted the first half mile. I did.

The historical collection didn’t open until ten. I arrived at nine thirty-eight. “Excellent.” The building remained locked. I considered this unreasonable despite the clearly posted hours. There was a bench outside. I removed my pack and sat. The walking staff rested against the bench beside me. I’d carried that staff for so long that I rarely thought about it anymore. It wasn’t particularly beautiful. Nobody had carved elaborate designs into it. There were no feathers tied beneath the grip, no polished stone set into the top, no mysterious symbols promising ancient powers. It was a piece of hardwood I’d found years ago that happened to be the right length and shape. I’d cleaned it up. Smoothed a few

rough places. That was about it. Time had done the rest. The section beneath my hand had become polished from use. The bottom was scarred from rock, mud, pavement and distances I couldn't begin to calculate. It had tested creek beds. Found unstable rocks before my boots did. Taken some of my weight on steep descents. Moved branches. Reached things I couldn't. And, when necessary, served as the world's least sophisticated photographic equipment. I picked it up. There was a shallow worn area along one side where I often braced the camera. I ran my thumb across it. "Still cheaper than a tripod." The staff did not dispute this. I leaned it against my shoulder and took out the field guide I'd acquired yesterday. For anyone curious enough to stop and look. I smiled at the inscription again. Then I read until the door opened.

The woman from my previous visit recognized me. "Back already?" "I forgot to be finished." She considered this. "History has that problem." "I was afraid of that." She unlocked the second door and switched on the lights. "Anything in particular?" "Photograph." "Which one?" "River crossing. E. Mercer." She paused. Not dramatically. Just long enough to search her memory. "Back wall." "I remember." "Then why did you ask?" "I didn't." She thought about that. "Right." I liked her. I walked toward the display.

The photograph was exactly where I'd left it. This seemed reasonable. I stood in front of it. Riverbank. Trees. Rough trail. Two distant figures. River crossing, Olympic Peninsula, 1890. E. Mercer. I didn't read the journal fragment this time. I looked only at the photograph. At first I couldn't remember what had bothered me. So I waited. Photography had taught me that staring harder rarely improved your vision. Sometimes you needed to stop trying to find something. I stepped back. Looked at the whole image. Closer again. The two people weren't the subject. I'd noticed that before. They were too small. The trail wasn't exactly the subject either. Neither was the river. So what was? I tilted my head. The woman behind the desk was sorting papers. I looked again. Then I saw it. "You're crooked." The woman looked up. "Excuse me?" "Not you." "Good." "The photograph." She came over. I pointed without touching the display. "The horizon." She studied it. "Looks straight to me." "It mostly is." "That's reassuring." I smiled. "Look at the trees." She did. "The camera isn't square to the crossing." "Okay." "Mercer wasn't standing where you'd expect." She looked at me. "Where would I expect?" I stepped slightly to one side. "If the people were the subject, probably here." I shifted again. "If the crossing was the subject, somewhere closer to this." "And?" "He stood over there." I pointed toward an imaginary position farther away. She looked at the photograph. Then at me. "How can you tell?" "Perspective." That wasn't entirely true. Perspective was part of it. Instinct was another. I'd spent years deciding

where to put my own feet before taking photographs. Sometimes moving six inches changed everything. Mercer had chosen his position. I wanted to know why.

"Do you have a larger copy?" The woman considered. "Maybe." She returned to the desk and checked a catalog. I waited. Then she disappeared into another room. I looked at the photograph. "Don't get excited." It remained appropriately restrained. The woman returned with a binder. "Reproductions." She placed it on a table. "Gloves?" "Not necessary. These are modern copies." I sat. The walking staff leaned against the table beside me. She found the image. Larger. Much better. I studied it. Now I could see more detail. One person near the river held something. Maybe equipment. Maybe a bag. The other stood slightly farther up the trail. But my attention kept returning to the right edge. Trees. Brush. Nothing. I leaned closer. There was a dark shape behind one of the trunks. I stared. The woman noticed. "What?" "Probably nothing." "That's convincing." "It might be part of a structure." She leaned over. "Where?" I pointed. She squinted. "Could be." "Could be a stump." "Could be." "Rock." "Possibly." "Very cooperative bear." She looked at me. "Bear?" "No." She laughed. I sat back. Whatever the shape was, Mercer had included it. That didn't mean he'd intended to. Photographs collect accidents. Things at the edges. People in backgrounds. Reflections. Shadows. Details the photographer never noticed. I'd taken enough pictures to know that. Yesterday I'd photographed a book exchange and later discovered my own reflection in the glass. The photograph didn't become a self-portrait because of it. Maybe this was the same. Still. I wanted to see the original. "Do you have the negative?" "No." "Original print?" "No." "Know who does?" She looked at the catalog. "Source says private collection." "Whose?" "No name here." That was mildly irritating. I tried another question. "Do you know what the E stands for?" She checked. "No." "Anything else by Mercer?" Another pause. "I think so." That was much more interesting.

We searched the catalog. Not quickly. This was a small historical collection, not a national archive with everything digitized and searchable in seconds. Some records were on the computer. Others were in binders. Some apparently existed primarily because somebody remembered where they had put them. I understood this system. My backpack operated similarly. Eventually we found another photograph. Then another. Both attributed to E. Mercer. The first showed a small settlement. The second showed a group standing near stacked timber. Neither was particularly remarkable. I studied them anyway. Same photographer? Probably. The framing felt similar. Not identical. Similar. Mercer tended to leave room around people. A lot of room. Buildings weren't centered. Neither were faces. He photographed surroundings. Context. Place. I

liked him more. “Any others?” “Probably.” That word again. I smiled. “Careful.” “What?” “Nothing.”

By noon, we’d found six Mercer photographs. None contained anything mysterious. One was terrible. This delighted me. The exposure was poor, one side was too dark, and someone near the edge had moved during the photograph. I looked at it for a long time. “What?” the woman asked. “He’s human.” “Was that in doubt?” “Photographically.” She laughed. “Everyone takes bad pictures.” “Exactly.” The image made Mercer more real. Whoever he had been, he hadn’t wandered around producing perfect historical artifacts. Sometimes he got the settings wrong. Sometimes people moved. Sometimes the light didn’t cooperate. Good. I understood that. I took out my notebook. E. Mercer. At least six photographs. 1890-ish. Photographs places more than people. Then I added: One bad photograph. The woman read over my shoulder. “Important?” “Extremely.”

I asked whether I could photograph the reproductions for personal reference. She allowed it. I took out the camera. The overhead light reflected badly on the protective sleeve. I moved. Still there. I moved again. Worse. I looked at the table. Then at my walking staff. “All right.” I planted the staff firmly beside the table and braced one hand against it, using the familiar support to steady myself while positioning the camera above the binder without touching anything. The shutter speed was slower than I wanted. I held still. Click. Checked it. Sharp. “Useful,” the woman said. I looked at the staff. “Occasionally.” “You hike with that?” “Mostly.” “And use it as a tripod?” “Poorly.” She smiled. I photographed the other reproductions. When I finished, the camera went away and the staff returned to my hand. Simple. Routine. The woman probably forgot about it immediately. So did I.

I left the collection shortly after one. I now knew considerably more about E. Mercer than I had that morning. Which was to say almost nothing. Six photographs. Possibly more. Active around 1890. Apparently interested in documenting travel and settlements. First initial E. That was it. No biography. No dramatic disappearance. No famous expedition. No obvious reason I should care. I stood outside. “Well, Mercer. You’ve successfully become slightly less anonymous.” That seemed sufficient. I started walking.

I didn’t retrace yesterday’s route immediately. Instead I headed toward a small public area near the river. There were picnic tables. I chose one. Pack down. Staff against the bench. Lunch out. Bread. Cheese. Dried fruit. Blackberry jam. The jam had survived. Barely. I spread some on the bread. “Still worth it.” A couple at another table were arguing with a portable stove. Not angrily. Mechanically. One turned a knob. Nothing. The other examined the fuel connection. Still nothing.

I ate. They continued. Eventually the stove produced a flame. Both stepped backward as though they'd successfully negotiated a peace treaty. I raised my bread slightly in salute. Neither noticed. Probably for the best.

After lunch, I opened the field guide. The riverbank had plenty to identify. Sword ferns were easy. Douglas fir. Western red cedar. Then I found a small plant growing near the edge of the picnic area. I crouched. Looked at the leaves. Looked at the guide. Looked at the plant. Back to the guide. "Hmm." Two possibilities. I wasn't certain. So I left it uncertain. That's another useful skill. Not knowing something doesn't obligate you to immediately invent an answer. I photographed the plant for later identification. Reference shot. Nothing artistic. Then I stood. Across the river, sunlight touched the trees. The camera stayed in my hand. I considered the scene. Not enough. I waited. Clouds moved. The sunlight expanded. The water brightened. Still not enough. I planted the walking staff. Rested my left hand lightly against it. The camera steadied. A breeze moved across the river, disturbing the reflection. I waited. The breeze stopped. The water settled. Trees appeared in the surface. Not perfectly. Better. I framed the shot. Then a duck swam directly through the reflection. I lowered the camera. The duck continued. "Take your time." It did. I waited until the ripples disappeared. The reflection returned. Click. I checked it. Good. Maybe keeper. I stayed another few minutes. The light changed again. This time the reflected trees became darker while the real trees above them brightened. Better. Staff planted. Camera steady. Click. Keeper. I picked up the staff. Then the duck returned. I stared at it. The duck stared back. "Now you're doing it deliberately." The duck seemed comfortable with this accusation.

I followed the river for much of the afternoon. The path was easy. That gave my mind room to wander. E. Mercer. Why E? Edward? Edwin? Elias? Eleanor? Elizabeth? Could have been anything. I realized I'd automatically imagined Mercer as a man. There was no evidence for that. "Interesting." I wrote that down. Do not assume E. Mercer was male. Then I put the notebook away. This was how curiosity worked. One question produced another. Not because there was a mystery. Because unanswered things naturally attracted questions. Most questions went nowhere. That was fine. I didn't need Mercer to become important. I just wanted to know who had taken the photograph.

Later, the path crossed a small stream. Finally. An opportunity. I stopped at the bank. Water moved over stones. Not deep. Not fast. Perfectly ordinary. I planted the staff into the water ahead of me. Firm bottom. One step. Staff again. Another. The third stone looked stable. I tested it. It shifted. I looked down. "See?" I chose another. The crossing

took perhaps fifteen seconds. No slipping. No wet boot. No unnecessary negotiations. I reached the other side and looked back. “Personal growth.” The stream remained unimpressed.

A few miles later I encountered an older woman sitting on a bench beside the path. She had binoculars. I nodded. “Afternoon.” “Hello.” I would have kept walking. Then she said, “There’s an owl.” I stopped. Dangerous words. “Where?” She pointed into the trees. I followed the direction. Nothing. “See that broken branch?” “Yes.” “Go left.” I did. “Big cedar.” “Yes.” “Halfway up.” Nothing. Then the shape resolved. Owl. Perfectly still. I smiled. “There you are.” The woman handed me the binoculars. I accepted them. The owl sat against the trunk, feathers blending astonishingly well with the bark. I watched. Then returned the binoculars. “Thank you.” “You have a camera.” I did. This presented a problem. I wanted the photograph. The owl was in shade. Longer lens. Slow shutter. Not ideal. I moved carefully without approaching the bird or leaving the path. Found an angle. Staff planted. Camera braced. I exhaled slowly. Click. Blurry. “Fair.” I adjusted. Tried again. Click. Better. The owl turned its head. I waited. The woman remained completely silent. The owl looked toward us. Not alarmed. Just aware. I steadied the camera. Click. There. Keeper. I lowered the camera. The owl stayed. I didn’t take another. Sometimes you get the photograph. Then you stop bothering the subject. I sat on the far end of the bench. The woman and I watched the owl for several minutes.

Her name was Margaret. She’d been birding for forty years. This immediately made her more useful than my field guide. We talked quietly. She told me about owls she’d seen in the area. Migration. Habitat. Changes she’d noticed over the decades. I listened. Eventually she asked what I photographed. “Whatever interests me.” “Birds?” “Today.” “Yesterday?” “An old truck.” She smiled. “Day before?” “Cabin.” “Before that?” I thought. “Driftwood.” Margaret lowered the binoculars. “You don’t specialize.” “I’m very committed to being inconsistent.” She laughed quietly. The owl opened its wings. We both stopped talking. It flew. Silent. Almost impossibly so. I raised the camera instinctively. Too late. The owl disappeared between the trees. Margaret smiled. “You missed it.” “I got the one I wanted.” “Good answer.” We sat another minute. Then I stood. “Thank you for showing me.” “You’re welcome.” I shouldered my pack. Staff in hand. Then continued down the trail.

I found camp in the early evening. Nothing dramatic happened. I liked that. I set up. Made dinner. Coffee. Then reviewed the day’s photographs. Mercer reproductions. Reference. Plant. Reference. River reflection. Keeper. Owl. Definitely keeper. I enlarged the owl photograph. Sharp eyes. Soft background. The bark and feathers nearly blended together. I smiled. That one might be one of my favorites from the

trip. Then I reached a photograph I didn't remember taking. I frowned. It showed the historical collection. Exterior. Morning. Apparently I'd taken it while waiting for the doors to open. The building itself wasn't interesting. But leaning against the bench was my walking staff. My pack sat beside it. The field guide lay open on the seat. No Bone. Just the things I'd carried. I looked at it for a while. Not technically a good photograph. Still. Keeper. I wasn't entirely sure why.

Darkness settled. I opened the field guide. Then closed it again. Opened my notebook instead. E. Mercer. I added the photographs we'd found. Locations. Approximate dates. Nothing connected them beyond the photographer. At the bottom I wrote: Why photograph the river crossing from that angle? I stared at the question. Then underneath: Maybe because it looked good. I laughed. "There's a possibility." Not everything had a hidden meaning. Photographers sometimes stood somewhere because the light was better. Or the ground was flatter. Or there was a tree in the way. Or because they simply liked the view. I closed the notebook. Tomorrow I would continue south. Probably. Mercer could wait. I'd learned something about him. That was enough. For now.

The night became colder than I'd expected. I added another layer. The fire settled into glowing coals. I sat beside it with my adventure novel. Then remembered I'd given the adventure novel away. I stared at my empty hand. "Right." I reached for the field guide instead. Plants. Useful. Educational. Responsible. I read three pages. Then sighed. "I miss the idiot." Somewhere, hopefully, another reader was discovering that the hero had absolutely no business entering that cave. I smiled. Then continued reading about ferns. It wasn't the same. But tomorrow there would be another town. Eventually another bookstore. Another book. Another trail. There always was. And somewhere behind me sat a photograph taken more than a century ago by someone whose first name I didn't know. That could wait too. I leaned my walking staff against my chair, opened the field guide beneath the firelight, and turned the page. Some Trails Are Traveled Alone, Some Trails Are Traveled Together

CHAPTER 7

A Good Reason to Stop

I left the river the next morning. Not because I had exhausted everything interesting along it. That would have taken considerably longer. I simply felt like going somewhere else. This is one of the less complicated reasons for travel. The sky was clear enough that sunlight reached the ground before breakfast, which seemed almost suspicious after the previous week. I sat with coffee warming my hands and watched steam rise from the cup. Somewhere nearby, a bird made a call I didn't recognize. I listened. It called again. I considered reaching for the field guide. Then remembered the field guide was about plants. "You're safe for now." The bird called once more. I finished my coffee.

I packed camp without much urgency. The camera went where I could reach it. The field guide went into the pack beside the regional history. Food was checked. Water was checked. The little jar of blackberry jam had reached a point where carrying it any farther would have been irresponsible. So breakfast had been generous. I cleaned the jar and tucked it away. Small glass jars are useful. They are also dangerous because once you've decided they're useful, you start carrying empty glass jars across entire states. I looked at it. "No." The jar went into recycling at the campground. Personal growth comes in many forms.

The route I'd chosen moved gradually inland. I had no particular destination beyond a town that looked reasonably reachable by late afternoon. According to the map, there were several smaller roads and trails I could use to avoid spending the whole day beside traffic. The first few miles were uneventful. I liked them. The forest thinned occasionally, opening onto small clearings and stretches of second-growth woodland. I passed a house with three rusted bicycles leaning against a fence, a mailbox painted to resemble a trout, and a driveway guarded by a wooden carving of a bear wearing a yellow raincoat. I stopped at the bear. It held a sign. GO AWAY I studied it. The bear appeared cheerful. The message did not. "Mixed signals." I continued walking.

Around ten, I reached a small bridge. Not an old bridge. Not a collapsed bridge. Not a mysterious bridge. Just a perfectly functional bridge. I crossed it. Nothing happened. I stopped on the other side. Looked back. “Excellent work.” Apparently my standards had changed. The road climbed beyond the bridge. Halfway up the hill, I heard an engine behind me and stepped well onto the shoulder. A small pickup passed. The driver waved. I waved back. A dog in the passenger seat watched me through the open window. For perhaps two seconds, we made eye contact. Then the truck disappeared around the bend. I kept walking.

A little before noon, I found a sign for a public trail. I checked my map. It was there. This was becoming an unusually successful day. The trail would add perhaps a mile to my route but keep me away from the road for several hours. Easy decision. I turned onto it. The path followed a creek through forest. The ground was damp but firm, and wooden footbridges crossed the wettest areas. Actual footbridges. Someone had apparently anticipated that people might want to cross water without conducting a geological survey first. I approved. The trail wasn’t spectacular. No enormous waterfall. No sweeping overlook. No abandoned cabin waiting behind the trees. It was simply pleasant. I walked.

Eventually I heard voices ahead. Two people stood beside the trail. One was staring upward. The other was staring at a phone. I slowed. The woman with the phone looked at me. “Do you know what kind of tree this is?” I looked up. Large trunk. Thick bark. Tall enough that identifying anything near the top would have required considerably more neck than I possessed. “I know enough to be dangerous.” The man laughed. I took out the field guide. “Fortunately, I recently acquired assistance.” The three of us looked at the tree. Then the book. Then the tree again. We reached a conclusion. Then immediately doubted it. The woman tried an identification app on her phone. It suggested something entirely different. “Well,” I said, “now there are four of us and nobody knows.” She laughed. The man pointed toward another tree. “Maybe that one?” “No,” the woman said. “We’re finishing this one.” I respected the commitment. We spent another five minutes examining bark, needles and nearby cones. Eventually we settled on Douglas fir. Probably. The woman took a photograph. “So I can check later.” “Excellent strategy.” She looked at my camera. “You taking pictures too?” “Sometimes.” “Take one of the tree.” I considered it. “No.” “Why?” I looked up. “It’s not doing anything.” The man laughed. “It’s a tree.” “Exactly.” I returned the field guide to my pack. They introduced themselves as Sarah and Luis. They were visiting from Tacoma and had decided to hike the trail because somebody at their hotel had recommended it. “What’s at the end?” Sarah asked. I

shrugged. “You don’t know?” “No.” “Where are you going?” “Same direction you are.” Luis smiled. “Do you know where that is?” “Generally.” Sarah looked at him. “I like his planning.” “I don’t,” Luis said. “That’s because you made an itinerary.” “I like itineraries.” “So I’ve heard.” I started walking with them. Not because we’d agreed to. We simply happened to be moving in the same direction. Sometimes that’s enough.

Sarah and Luis had been married eight years. I learned this because Luis mentioned their anniversary trip. Sarah corrected him. “This isn’t our anniversary trip.” “It was supposed to be.” “Our anniversary was four months ago.” “We got busy.” “So this is our anniversary-adjacent trip.” I nodded. “Important distinction.” “Thank you,” Sarah said. Luis sighed. We walked. They asked about my travels. I answered. I asked about theirs. Luis worked in building maintenance. Sarah was a veterinary technician. That led to approximately twenty minutes of stories about animals. I mostly listened. Sarah had learned that dogs would attempt to eat nearly anything. Luis argued that this wasn’t limited to dogs. He told a story involving himself, age six, and a decorative candle. Sarah looked at me. “See what I live with?” “Was it good?” Luis considered. “No.” “Then you learned something.” “Exactly.” Sarah shook her head.

The trail widened near the creek. A fallen log beside the water offered a reasonable place for lunch. We stopped. Sarah and Luis had sandwiches. I had bread, cheese and dried fruit. Luis looked at my food. “That’s lunch?” “Yes.” “Every day?” “No. Sometimes there’s jam.” He nodded slowly. “Right.” Sarah elbowed him. “What?” “Leave him alone.” “I’m not judging.” “You looked like you were judging.” “I was comparing.” “To what?” “My sandwich.” I held up the cheese. “Mine has fewer structural requirements.” Luis considered this. “That’s fair.” We ate.

The creek moved quietly beside us. Sunlight occasionally reached the water through the canopy. I noticed a cluster of leaves floating near the edge. They’d collected behind a small branch. Yellow. Green. One deep red. The current tugged at them without carrying them away. Camera. I crouched near the bank, staying on firm ground. The first shot was ordinary. Leaves. Water. Pretty enough. I waited. A little more sunlight reached the surface. Too bright. Waited. Cloud. Better. The water darkened. The red leaf stood out against it. I framed tighter. A tiny ripple moved through. Wait. Still. Click. I checked it. Keeper. Behind me, Luis said, “You waited a long time for leaves.” I stood. “They were busy.” “Doing what?” “Becoming a photograph.” Sarah smiled. “I like that.” Luis looked at the leaves. “They look exactly the same.” “That’s because they’re finished.” He stared at me. Then laughed. “Okay. I walked into that.”

We continued together for another mile. At a junction, Sarah and Luis turned toward a loop that would take them back to their car. I was continuing south. “Nice meeting you,” Sarah said. “You too.” Luis pointed at my lunch bag. “Get some jam.” “I’ll consider it.” They headed away. I watched them for a few seconds. Then continued alone. The forest became quiet again. It didn’t feel emptier. Just quiet. There was a difference.

The trail eventually returned me to a road. By midafternoon, the weather had changed. Clouds thickened from the west. Wind moved through the treetops. I checked the sky. Rain. Probably. I checked the map. The town I was aiming for was still several miles away. There was a covered picnic area marked about a mile ahead. That seemed useful. I increased my pace slightly. Not much. Running from weather is usually an excellent way to arrive tired and wet instead of merely wet. The first drops fell before I reached the shelter. Large. Cold. Scattered. I put the camera beneath my jacket. The rain strengthened. Then the sky opened. “Of course.” I walked faster.

The shelter appeared through the trees. Roof. Tables. Three walls. No people. Perfect. I stepped inside. Thirty seconds later the rain became torrential. I removed my pack. Water dripped from my jacket. “Excellent timing.” Thunder rolled somewhere in the distance. I looked toward the open side of the shelter. The forest beyond had almost disappeared behind rain. The road was barely visible. I wasn’t going anywhere. So I sat.

There are worse places to be stuck. I had food. Water. A roof. A book. I took out the regional history. The rain hammered the shelter. I read. Ten minutes later, thunder sounded again. Closer. I closed the book. The light outside had changed. The forest was dark, but somewhere beyond the rain the sun had found a break in the clouds. The rain itself began to glow. I stood. Camera. The obvious composition was straight through the shelter opening. Too much roof. I moved to one side. Better. A picnic table occupied the foreground. I didn’t mind it. The table made the photograph feel inhabited. I planted the staff beside me, braced myself lightly and waited. Rain moved in silver sheets beyond the shelter. Then sunlight broke through. For perhaps fifteen seconds, the entire clearing lit from behind. Every drop seemed visible. Click. Again. Click. The light shifted. A narrow beam struck one tree while everything around it remained gray. Click. Then the sun vanished. The rain became ordinary rain again. I checked the photographs. Second one. Keeper. Definitely. I lowered the camera. “Well.” The storm had been worth stopping for.

I sat again. The rain continued for another half hour. Eventually it softened. Then stopped. Water dripped from the roof. Birds began calling. The forest brightened. I packed the camera. Then I noticed the puddle. It had formed just beyond the shelter. Nothing special. A shallow pool in gravel. But the sky reflected in it. Dark clouds above. A patch of blue opening between them. And the edge of the shelter roof. I crouched. The reflection was better than the actual sky. I moved lower. Closer. The puddle filled the frame. Now it looked almost like a lake. I smiled. Click. Keeper. I stood. Some photographs required mountains. Some required weather. Apparently some required poor drainage.

I resumed walking. Everything smelled different after the storm. Wet pavement. Pine. Soil. Leaves. The air had cooled. Steam rose faintly from the road where sunlight reached it. I stopped. There. The road curved between trees. Sunlight struck the wet surface. Mist rose. Beautiful. Camera. I framed it. Waited. A car appeared around the bend. I lowered the camera. It passed. Spray. Noise. Gone. Waited. The mist returned. I raised the camera. A second car. "Really?" Lowered. It passed. I waited again. Nothing. Camera up. A pickup. I laughed. "Fine." I put the camera away. Some photographs weren't meant to happen. I walked down the road. Naturally, no more vehicles appeared.

The town was smaller than I expected. That suited me. A few businesses. Gas station. Small grocery. Cafe. Hardware store. A building with a sign reading: USED BOOKS • RECORDS • ODDS & ENDS I stopped. "Well." The universe occasionally apologized.

The store was narrow and crowded. Books occupied most of the shelves. Records occupied the rest. The "odds & ends" seemed to have escaped containment and spread everywhere. Old cameras. Postcards. Coffee mugs. Lamps. Tools. Framed photographs. A wooden duck. Three clocks, none showing the same time. I liked it immediately. A man behind the counter looked up. "Afternoon." "Afternoon." "Need help?" "Probably eventually." He nodded. "Good enough." I browsed. Fiction first. I wanted something ridiculous. Not intentionally ridiculous. That was important. A book that sincerely believed in itself while making increasingly questionable decisions. I found one with a ship on the cover. Pirates. Storm. Possibly a sea monster. Promising. I read the back. Very promising. Then I noticed the photography section. "That's unfair." I picked up a book about landscape photography. Heavy. No. Another. Also heavy. Then a thin older book on composition. I opened it. Black-and-white photographs. Simple explanations. Nothing I hadn't encountered before. Still interesting. I checked the price. Cheap. I checked the weight. Acceptable. The pirate novel and photography book came with me.

At the counter, the owner looked at my choices. “Interesting combination.” “I contain multitudes.” He rang them up. I glanced at the postcards near the register. Old local scenes. Logging camps. Town streets. Bridges. Rivers. I flipped through them. Most were reproductions. One showed a river crossing. I stopped. Not the river crossing. A different one. Later photograph. Different location. I turned it over. No Mercer. I almost put it back. Then I noticed the framing. People small. Landscape dominant. I turned it over again. Photographer attribution: E. Mercer Collection I stared. The shop owner noticed. “Something wrong?” “Do you know anything about this?” He looked. “Postcard?” “The photographer.” He took it. “Mercer?” “Yes.” He shrugged. “Local photographer, wasn’t he?” “Was he?” “Think so.” “You know his first name?” The owner thought. “No.” “Man or woman?” Another pause. “No idea.” “How old is this postcard?” “That one’s a modern reproduction.” “I mean the photograph.” He put on his glasses. “Caption says eighteen ninety-two.” Two years after the river photograph. I looked at the image again. “Where’d you get these?” “Distributor.” “Local?” “Regional.” “Do they have more Mercer photographs?” “Probably.” I smiled. He looked at me. “What?” “Nothing.”

I bought the postcard. Of course I did. Outside, I stood beneath the awning. Rainwater still dripped from the roof. I looked at the photograph again. E. Mercer.

Another river. Maybe the same photographer. Probably the same photographer. Still nothing particularly mysterious. But Mercer had apparently photographed enough of the region that somebody was selling reproductions more than a century later. That was something. I put the postcard carefully inside the photography book. Then I walked toward the grocery store. I needed dinner. History could wait until after food.

The grocery store had soup. Hot soup. This removed several decisions from my evening. I ate at a small table near the front window. Rain started again outside. Light this time. I opened the pirate novel. Page one contained a shipwreck. Efficient. By page eight someone had discovered a mysterious map. “Here we go.” I kept reading.

I found a legal place to camp outside town before dark. The rain stopped. Camp went up. Dry socks. Coffee. Then I sat with the postcard. I compared it to the reference photograph of Mercer’s river crossing on my camera. Different river. Different year. Same habit. People small. Environment large. I took out the thin photography book I’d bought. There was a chapter on visual emphasis. I read a few pages. Then looked at Mercer again. Most people photographing travelers would make the travelers the subject. Mercer didn’t. Why? Maybe because Mercer wasn’t photographing the travelers. Maybe Mercer was photographing the route. That seemed obvious. So obvious that I wondered

why it had taken me this long. I opened my notebook. Mercer may have been documenting routes, not people. Then I stopped. The journal fragment. The one displayed beside the first photograph. Poor maps. Local knowledge. Rivers. Trails. Terrain. I sat very still. Not because I'd solved anything. I hadn't. But for the first time, the photographs and the writing seemed to belong to the same idea. Mercer wasn't merely traveling with a camera. Mercer might have been recording how people moved through the peninsula. I wrote: Travel survey? Personal project? Expedition? Then: Maps? I looked at that word. There had been maps in the historical display. I hadn't paid much attention to them. "Of course." I closed the notebook. I was not walking back tomorrow. Absolutely not. There were other historical collections. Other towns. Other archives. If Mercer had traveled through the region, evidence wouldn't necessarily exist in one building. I could keep moving. That felt better. The question could travel with me.

I made coffee. Then opened the pirate novel. By page thirty-seven, the mysterious map had been stolen. I nodded. "That's what happens when you leave maps unattended." A branch snapped somewhere beyond camp. I looked up. Nothing. Probably a deer. Maybe something smaller. I listened. Another rustle. Then silence. I returned to the book. The pirate captain was lying. Obviously. I liked him.

Sometime later, I heard an animal in the brush again. Closer this time. I set the book down. Waited. Nothing. Then a small shape emerged near the edge of camp. Raccoon. It stopped. I stopped. We looked at one another. Its attention shifted toward my food. "No." The raccoon took a step. "Absolutely not." Another. I stood. It stopped. "I have traveled too far carrying that." The raccoon appeared unmoved by the argument. I secured the food more thoroughly. It watched. "You're not getting the cheese." The raccoon eventually retreated. I sat again. A minute later I heard movement from the same direction. I looked up. Nothing. "You had your chance." No response. I returned to the book.

The next morning was clear. Actually clear. Blue sky. Sun. I stood outside camp with coffee. "Who authorized this?" No clouds answered. I packed slowly. The postcard went into my notebook. The pirate novel went somewhere accessible. The photography book joined the regional history and field guide. Three books. I lifted the pack. Heavy enough. "No more." That rule would last until the next bookstore. Probably. I started walking south.

The road climbed gradually. The morning became warmer. After an hour, I stopped at an overlook. The landscape opened beyond the trees. Low hills. Forest. A ribbon of river in the distance. Clear sky. Beautiful. I took out the camera. Looked. Nothing. The light was too flat. The sky too empty. Everything was visible. Nothing was interesting. I put

the camera away. “Come back with clouds.” Then I sat. I took out the pirate novel. Read. A truck passed. Then another. A bird landed on the guardrail. Small brown thing. I glanced at it. The bird looked at me. I looked back at the book. It hopped closer. I kept reading. Another hop. “You’re not getting the cheese either.” The bird flew away. Apparently word was spreading.

I stayed at the overlook for almost an hour. Not waiting for a photograph. Just reading. Eventually I closed the book. The landscape hadn’t changed much. Still beautiful. Still not a photograph I wanted. That was fine. I shouldered my pack. Started walking. Ten minutes later, clouds began appearing over the hills. I stopped. Looked back. “No.” I continued. Some opportunities deserve patience. Others deserve boundaries.

Near noon, I passed another house. A dog barked from behind a fence. I kept walking. Another bark. Then another. Not aggressive. Just announcing me. I glanced over. Large dog. Dark coat. Shaggy. The dog stood with its front paws against the fence. Tail moving. “Hello.” The tail moved faster. I didn’t approach. The dog belonged there. I continued. It barked once more as I walked away. Then stopped. A few minutes later, I heard another dog somewhere farther down the road. Then another. I frowned. A lot of dogs. The road curved. A sign appeared ahead. I couldn’t read it yet. I kept walking. The barking became louder. Several dogs now. Different voices. High. Low. One particularly enthusiastic. I approached the sign. There was a driveway beyond it. A low building. Fenced outdoor runs. I stopped. Read the sign. Animal shelter. “Huh.” A dog barked from somewhere inside. Another answered. I stood beside the road. I’d walked past shelters before. Plenty of them. There was no particular reason this one should be different. I adjusted my backpack. Started walking. Made it perhaps ten steps. A chorus of barking rose behind me. I stopped. Looked back. “No.” I turned forward again. Five more steps. One dog gave a long, ridiculous howl. I closed my eyes. “That was unnecessary.” Another dog joined in. I turned around. The shelter sat quietly behind its sign while the inhabitants continued making their opinions known. I looked at the road south. Then at the shelter. I wasn’t looking for anything. That was important. I had food to replenish eventually. A photographer named Mercer to investigate whenever the opportunity presented itself. A pirate novel involving an increasingly unreliable map. A perfectly good life. I traveled well alone. I liked traveling alone. Still... I looked toward the fenced runs. I’d spent the last several days meeting people because I’d stopped. Ruth. Marcus and Elena. Margaret. Sarah and Luis. A bookstore owner who apparently knew more about Mercer than he realized. Every one of those encounters had happened because I’d taken a little time to see what was there. I looked at the shelter again. “Just looking.” This was an obvious

lie. I didn't know that yet. I walked up the driveway. The barking grew louder. I opened the door. And stepped inside. Some Trails Are Traveled Alone, Some Trails Are Traveled Together

CHAPTER 8

Just Looking

The first thing I noticed was the smell. Not a bad smell, exactly. Cleaner. Disinfectant. Dog. Wet dog. Dry dog. Food. Something vaguely medicinal. And beneath all of it, the unmistakable atmosphere of a building occupied by animals who had collectively decided that silence was unacceptable. The door closed behind me. The barking intensified. "Yes," I said. "I heard you outside." This did not satisfy anyone. A high-pitched bark came from somewhere to my left. A deeper voice answered from farther back. Then something produced a sound halfway between a howl and an argument. I looked toward the front desk. "Busy place." The woman sitting behind it smiled. "You get used to it." A dog barked loudly enough to challenge that assertion. She didn't react. Apparently she had.

The lobby was small. Photographs covered one wall. Dogs. Cats. A rabbit. More dogs. Most of the pictures had little handwritten notes beneath them. ADOPTED HOME! FOUND MY FAMILY One photograph showed an elderly dog sleeping on a couch beneath a blanket. Another showed a puppy sitting in the middle of what appeared to have once been a decorative pillow. The caption underneath read: DAY THREE. WE'RE DOING GREAT. I looked at the pillow. "Debatable." "What was that?" I turned toward the woman at the desk. "Nothing." She smiled again. "Can I help you?" I adjusted my pack. "Just looking." There it was again. She didn't challenge it. "Dog or cat?" I looked toward the wall. "Apparently rabbit is also an option." "It was." "What happened?" "Adopted last week." "Good." "So, dog or cat?" I considered. "Dog, I think." "Looking for anything specific?" "No." "Size?" I thought about the way I traveled. "Not small." She waited. "That's usually the opposite of what people say." "I walk a lot." "How much is a lot?" "Depends on the day." "Five miles?" "Sometimes." "Ten?" "Sometimes." "More?" "Sometimes." She leaned back slightly. "Okay. Not small." "I don't think a Chihuahua would forgive me." She laughed. "Some might surprise you." "I'm sure they would. I'd just rather not discover the limits of six-inch legs twenty miles from town." "Fair." She pulled a clipboard from beneath the counter. "Do you have a home?" "Yes." She waited. "So?" "I

carry most of it." Her eyes moved toward my backpack. "You're traveling?" "Yes." "On foot?" "Mostly." She studied me for a moment. Not suspiciously. Practically. I appreciated that. "Where would the dog sleep?" "With me." "Food?" "I'd carry it." "Water?" "Same." "Vet care?" "Towns exist." "They do." "Fortunately." She tapped the clipboard against the counter. "And if the dog can't keep up?" "I don't take the dog." That answer seemed to matter. She nodded. "All right."

Her name was Megan. She asked me several more questions. Not invasive ones. Necessary ones. Had I owned dogs before? Yes. Was I prepared for training? Yes. Could I afford routine veterinary care? Yes. What would I do if the dog became injured on the trail? Stop traveling until the dog was cared for. What if the dog couldn't continue traveling permanently? Then I wouldn't continue traveling the same way. That answer made her pause. "So you'd change your lifestyle?" "If I brought someone into it, I'd have to." She looked at me for another second. Then wrote something on the clipboard. I couldn't see what. "All right." "Did I pass?" "This isn't a test." "It feels a little like a test." "It should." "Fair enough." She put the clipboard down. "Want to meet some dogs?" I looked toward the hallway. The barking had settled slightly. One voice remained determined to personally maintain the building's noise quota. I could still leave. I'd only come inside because I was curious. Just looking. I looked at the photographs on the wall again. Then at the hallway. "Sure."

The kennel area was louder. Much louder. Megan handed me a pair of foam earplugs. I looked at them. "Really?" "You'll still hear everything." I put them in. She was correct. We walked through another door. Dogs appeared on both sides. Different sizes. Different colors. Different reactions. Some rushed immediately toward the kennel doors. One bounced straight upward. All four paws left the ground. It landed. Bounced again. "That's Pepper," Megan said. Pepper bounced. "Enthusiastic." "Very." Bounce. "Does Pepper ever stop?" "Eventually." Pepper bounced. "I don't believe you."

The next dog didn't approach. Medium-sized. Tan. Curled tightly in the back corner. The dog watched us but didn't move. I stopped several feet from the kennel. "New?" Megan nodded. "Three days." I crouched, but not close. The dog's eyes followed me. I didn't reach through the bars. Didn't call. Didn't make noises. Just waited. After perhaps half a minute, the dog's head lowered slightly. Not relaxed. Less tense. "Scared," I said. "Very." "Owner surrender?" "Stray." I looked at the dog. "That's a lot of change." Megan nodded. We moved on. I didn't look back immediately. When I finally did, the dog was still watching.

Another dog brought us a tennis ball. There was a kennel door between us. This did not seem to matter. The dog dropped the ball. Picked

it up. Dropped it again. “You seem to have identified a logistical problem,” I said. The dog wagged harder. Megan opened a small slot in the kennel door and rolled the ball inside. The dog exploded after it. Returned. Dropped it. “Again?” Megan rolled it. The dog returned. Again. “How long does this continue?” “Until your arm falls off.” “Good to know.” We moved on before the experiment could be completed.

A little white dog barked at me with the fury of something defending an empire. I stopped. The dog barked. I looked at Megan. “Chihuahua?” “Mostly.” The dog barked again. “I rest my case.” Megan tried not to laugh. The Chihuahua objected to this. Loudly.

Farther down the row was an older dog. Gray muzzle. Heavy body. The dog didn’t get up. Its tail moved once against the bedding. Then again. I stopped. “Hello.” Tail. I crouched. The dog slowly stood. Walked over. Pressed its side against the kennel door. I put my fingers against the bars where the dog could sniff without me reaching into its space. The nose appeared. Sniff. Then the old dog leaned against the bars. I smiled. “You’re good at this.” “His name is Winston,” Megan said. “How old?” “About eleven.” I scratched gently where Megan indicated it was safe. Winston closed his eyes. For a moment, I considered it. Eleven. Miles every day. Uncertain terrain. Weather. Camping. Winston deserved something softer. Not because he couldn’t travel. Maybe he could. But I wasn’t looking for a dog who merely could survive my life. I wanted one who might enjoy it. I gave Winston one more scratch. “You need a couch.” His tail moved. “Preferably an irresponsible number of blankets.” Another tail thump. Megan smiled. “He’d agree.” I stood. That one was difficult to walk away from. But difficult wasn’t the same as wrong.

The next dog had no interest in me whatsoever. Large. Brown. Beautiful. The dog lay facing the opposite direction. I stopped. Nothing. “Hello.” One ear moved. That was all. “Strong opening.” Megan smiled. “She’s selective.” “I respect that.” We waited. Eventually the dog turned its head. Looked at me. Then looked away. “Apparently I have been evaluated.” “Apparently.” “Result?” “Unclear.” “Probably best not to appeal.” We continued.

There were more. A young shepherd mix who couldn’t decide whether to bark or hide. A stocky dog whose entire body wiggled when anyone came near. A lanky adolescent who appeared to have recently discovered legs but had not yet learned how many there were. A quiet black dog who sat politely and watched everyone pass. Each one had a personality. That was impossible to miss. Not a row of interchangeable dogs waiting for someone to choose the prettiest one. Individuals. Some frightened. Some excited. Some frustrated. Some hopeful. Some apparently convinced every person entering the building had arrived

specifically for them. I slowed. The barking stopped sounding like noise. Not entirely. There was still plenty of noise. But I began hearing the differences. The sharp repeated bark from a dog wanting attention. The high nervous bark from another who didn't know what was happening. The deep warning bark from one who needed more distance. The howl from the far end. That one seemed mostly theatrical. "Who's doing that?" Megan smiled. "You'll see."

We reached the end of the row. The howling stopped. I looked. Large kennel. Empty front. I could hear movement farther back. Something drinking water. Then silence. "He's shy?" "Not exactly." Megan leaned against the wall. "Give him a second." I waited. Nothing. Then a nose appeared around the edge of the interior partition. Dark. Large. The nose vanished. I smiled. "Good start." A moment later, the nose returned. Then part of a face. Black fur. Brown. Gray. Something lighter around the muzzle and chest. The dog looked at me. I looked back. He disappeared again. "Interesting." "He's been doing that with people." "How long has he been here?" "Couple of weeks." "What's his name?" Megan shook her head. "Came in as a stray. We use a temporary name, but he doesn't respond to it." "What do you call him?" "Bear." I looked toward the partition. "No." Megan laughed. "That's what I said."

The nose appeared again. Then the face. This time the dog came farther out. Large. Very large. Shaggy coat, mostly black but broken by brown, tan, white and gray. Broad head. Floppy ears. One lifted slightly when I shifted my weight. His tail hung behind him, long and hairy. He didn't approach the kennel door. He simply stood there. Watching. I crouched. Not close. "Hello." The dog tilted his head. One ear lifted again. "You're not Bear." Tail movement. Small. Maybe coincidence. "See?" I said to Megan. "He agrees." "That was scientific." "I have witnesses." The dog stepped forward. One step. Stopped. His eyes moved over me. Pack. Hat. Staff. Back to my face. He sniffed the air. Then another step.

He didn't rush the door. That interested me. Most of the larger friendly dogs had come straight toward us. This one seemed to be gathering information. I understood that. I sat down on the floor. Megan raised an eyebrow. "What?" "Nothing." "Floor seemed appropriate." "It's your pants." "Exactly." The dog watched me. I looked away. Not completely. Just enough to stop making the interaction a contest. For a while, nothing happened. Dogs barked behind us. A kennel latch clicked somewhere. Someone rolled a cart down the far hallway. The dog stayed where he was. Then I heard claws against concrete. One step. Another. I didn't turn. Sniffing. Closer. I held my hand loosely beside my knee. Not through the bars. Just there. The nose appeared. Sniff. Gone. Then back. Longer this time. The dog inhaled as though I contained several chapters worth of information. "Anything interesting?" His nose

moved toward my backpack. “That’s mostly cheese.” Megan laughed quietly. The dog sniffed again. Then sneezed. I looked at him. “Rude.” His mouth opened. Tongue appeared. For the first time, his expression changed. The cautious animal I’d been watching suddenly looked almost ridiculous. Broad face. Lopsided mouth. Tongue hanging slightly to one side. Tail moving. I smiled. “There you are.”

Megan opened the kennel. Not the hallway side. A door leading to an enclosed meeting yard. “Want to spend some time with him?” I stood. “Sure.” Just looking. Still. Probably.

The yard was grass and packed dirt surrounded by a high fence. A few toys. A water bowl. A bench. The dog came out before I did. Immediately, his entire posture changed. Nose down. Sniff. Three steps. Sniff. Turn. Investigate fence post. Sniff. Grass. Sniff. Leaf. Sniff. Another leaf apparently containing more significant information. Then he trotted toward the far end of the yard. I watched. “Different dog.” Megan nodded. “Kennels are hard on some of them.” The dog circled the yard. Not frantically. Exploring. Every corner mattered. Every smell received consideration. Then he found a stick. He picked it up. Carried it approximately six feet. Dropped it. Found something else. A pinecone. More interesting. He nosed it. Pushed it. Pounced. The pinecone rolled. He chased it. I looked at Megan. “How old?” “Best guess, three.” The dog pounced on the pinecone again. “Three seems plausible.”

I walked around the yard. The dog noticed. He followed. Not beside me. Not exactly. I turned left. He drifted left. I crossed toward the bench. He crossed behind me. I stopped. He stopped. I walked again. He followed. Then something near the fence caught his attention and he wandered away. “Independent,” I said. “Seems to be.” “Good.” Megan looked at me. “Good?” “I don’t need a dog staring at me all day waiting for instructions.” The dog shoved his nose beneath a tuft of grass. “Apparently.”

I sat on the bench. The dog continued exploring. I didn’t call him. A few minutes passed. Eventually he looked over. I was still there. He resumed sniffing. Another minute. Looked again. Then he walked toward me. Slowly. Stopped several feet away. I held out my hand. He approached. Sniffed. Then pushed his enormous head under it. “Subtle.” I scratched behind one floppy ear. His eyes partially closed. Then he leaned. Hard. I shifted on the bench. “You’re heavier than you look.” Megan laughed. “He’s about a hundred and fifteen pounds.” “That explains the structural failure.” The dog leaned harder. “Personal space is apparently negotiable.” His tail swept the ground.

Then he walked away. Just like that. I watched him return to the pinecone. I liked that too. He wanted attention. Then he wanted something else. No offense taken. No constant reassurance required. He simply moved on to the next interesting thing. I understood that.

Megan left us alone for a while. I sat. The dog explored. Eventually I stood and walked the perimeter. He joined me. We made several laps. At one point I increased my pace. He matched it easily. I slowed. He slowed. Stopped. He stopped. Then immediately wandered off to investigate a beetle. “Priorities.” The beetle escaped. The dog seemed disappointed.

I picked up a tennis ball. He noticed. Ears shifted. I tossed it. He ran. Fast. Much faster than his size suggested. He reached the ball. Picked it up. Turned toward me. I waited. He ran back. Excellent. Then continued directly past me. Less excellent. He carried the ball to the opposite side of the yard. Dropped it. Looked at me. I stared. “You misunderstand the arrangement.” Tail. I walked over. Picked up the ball. Threw it. He chased it. Returned halfway. Stopped. Dropped it. “You’ve negotiated me down.” Megan had returned. “He’s training you.” “So far I’m doing poorly.”

After another twenty minutes, I sat again. The dog came over and dropped beside my feet. Not touching. Close. His breathing slowed. I looked down. He looked up. One floppy ear folded strangely. I fixed it. The ear immediately folded again. “Fine.” I left it. Megan sat at the other end of the bench. “What do you think?” I watched the dog. “I think he’s a dog.” “Insightful.” “I’ve been doing a lot of historical research lately. My standards of evidence have increased.” She smiled. “You interested?” I didn’t answer immediately. That mattered. The dog had closed his eyes. “I don’t know.” “That’s okay.” “I wasn’t planning on getting a dog today.” “Most people who come in saying ’just looking’ aren’t.” “Is that why you didn’t believe me?” “I believed you.” “That’s worse.” “A little.” I looked at the dog again. “If I did this, he’d have to travel.” “Seems like he’d enjoy that.” “Seems isn’t enough.” “No.” “I’d need to know how he handles distance. People. Other animals. Roads. Camping.” “Yes.” “Recall.” “Training.” “Leash manners.” “Training.” “Food.” “Lots.” I looked at his size. “Yes.” “Vet.” “Yes.” “Weather.” “Yes.” I rubbed my beard. “This is getting expensive.” Megan laughed. “That’s dogs.”

The dog opened his eyes. He looked at me. Then put one paw on my boot. Not dramatically. Just rested it there. I stared down. “That seems manipulative.” Megan said nothing. The tail moved once. “You stay out of this.” “I didn’t say anything.” “Exactly.”

I didn’t adopt him. Not that day. That surprised me a little. Maybe Megan too. But she didn’t pressure me. Instead, she suggested something better. “Come back tomorrow.” I looked at her. “Take him for a walk with one of us.” “How far?” “We usually start around the property.

If that goes well, there's a public trail nearby." I looked down at the dog. His paw was still on my boot. "That would tell me more." "Exactly." "What if somebody adopts him before then?" "They could." I didn't like how quickly that answer bothered me. Megan noticed. She was polite enough not to smile. "Can you hold him?" "We don't hold adoptable animals without a reason." "Good." I meant it. Mostly. A dog shouldn't lose a home because someone who wasn't sure wanted extra thinking time. I scratched behind his ear again. "You're inconvenient." Tongue. Tail. No remorse.

We returned him to the kennel. That part changed him again. Not completely. But enough. His energy came down. The cautious look returned. He went inside. Turned. Watched me through the door. I crouched once more. "I might see you tomorrow." His ears lifted. I stood. Then walked away. I made it three kennels. Looked back. He was still watching. "Don't." Megan looked at me. "Don't what?" "Nothing."

At the front desk, she gave me information about the shelter's adoption process. Medical history. What they knew of him. What they didn't. He'd been found wandering near a rural road. No microchip. No owner located. Basic veterinary exam completed. Vaccinations updated. No obvious major health problems. Breed? Unknown. "Best guess?" I asked. Megan looked toward the kennel area. "Lab somewhere." "I can see that." "Maybe schnauzer." "Also plausible." "Terrier." "That's a very large terrier." "Mixed breeds don't read breed standards." "Fair." She handed me the paperwork. I folded it and put it carefully into my pack. "Still just looking?" she asked. "Absolutely." A dog howled from the kennel area. I looked toward the hallway. Megan folded her arms. "Coincidence." "Obviously."

I left. The afternoon sun had moved lower. The road waited. I stood beside it. South was to my left. My campsite from the previous night was several miles back in the other direction. There were places to camp farther south. I could continue. I had no obligation to return. I looked at the shelter. Then south. Then the shelter. "This is ridiculous." I started south.

I walked two miles. Maybe three. The road was pleasant. The weather was good. I found a small stream. I stopped for water and treated what I collected. I ate some dried fruit. I took out the pirate novel. Read four pages. Didn't absorb any of them. I went back. The map had been stolen. Someone had betrayed someone. There might have been a knife. I closed the book. "You're usually better at this." The book took no responsibility.

I thought about the dog. Not the paw on my boot. That was propaganda. I thought about the yard. How he'd explored. How he'd followed

without clinging. How he'd matched my pace. How he'd investigated everything. The pinecone. The beetle. The grass. He'd seemed interested in the world. That mattered. I thought about Winston. Winston would have loved me. I might have loved Winston. That didn't make us right for each other. Compatibility wasn't the same thing as affection. That was probably true of people too. I wasn't going to investigate that today.

I found a campsite before evening. Set up. Made dinner. Read. Tried not to think about the shelter. Failed. I took out my notebook. At the bottom of a page about E. Mercer, I wrote: Dog. Large. ~115 lbs. Mixed breed. Curious. Independent. Friendly after cautious introduction. I stared. Then added: Terrible at fetch. That seemed important. Then: Good walking pace. Then: Need to test on actual trail. I closed the notebook. Opened it again. Food weight. That was a problem. A serious one. A dog that size would eat a lot. Water too. My current system worked because I carried only what I needed. Adding a hundred-plus-pound animal changed the arithmetic considerably. Not impossible. But different. Long stretches between towns would require planning. More food. More water. More weight. Maybe supply caches. Maybe shorter routes. Maybe... I stopped. "Just looking." I closed the notebook.

That night, I dreamed about maps. Not dogs. Maps. Every trail on them had been replaced with paw prints. I woke sometime before dawn. Stared into darkness. "Very subtle." Then went back to sleep.

Morning arrived cold. I made coffee. Breakfast. Packed. The road south was waiting. So was the shelter behind me. I shouldered my pack. Picked up my staff. Started walking. North. I noticed immediately. "Interesting." I continued anyway.

The shelter opened at nine. I arrived at nine twelve. Megan was behind the desk. She looked up. "Morning." "Morning." Neither of us said anything else. I waited. She waited. Finally I sighed. "Is Bear available for a walk?" Megan smiled. "Bear?" "No." "That's his name here." "We'll work on that." Her smile widened. "I thought you were just looking." "I am." "Of course." She reached for a leash. From somewhere beyond the hallway came one deep bark. Then another. I looked toward the sound. For the first time since I'd stepped into the shelter yesterday, I found myself wondering what it might be like to hear that bark somewhere else. On a trail. At camp. Beside a river. Maybe arguing with a raccoon over cheese. I took the leash from Megan. "Let's see if he likes to walk." And somewhere behind the kennel door, the dog began to howl. Some Trails Are Traveled Alone, Some Trails Are Traveled Together

CHAPTER 9

A Walk Is Not a Test

The howl stopped the moment Megan opened the kennel door. Suspicious. A few seconds later, the dog appeared at the end of the hallway wearing a harness and looking considerably more pleased with the morning than he had any right to be. His tail swept from side to side. One floppy ear had folded backward. Megan handed me the leash. The dog looked at me. Then at the door. Back at me. Back at the door. "I think he's figured out the itinerary." "Probably." I clipped the leash to his harness. He immediately headed for the exit. "Apparently I'm optional." Megan laughed. "Give him a minute." The door opened. He stepped outside. And the dog I'd met in the kennel disappeared.

His nose hit the ground. Grass. Post. Sidewalk. Bush. Another post. Back to the first post, because apparently new information had become available. I stood there holding the leash. "Are we going somewhere?" He sniffed harder. Megan came through the door behind us. "Technically." The dog moved six feet. Stopped. Sniffed. Turned around. Sniffed where he'd already sniffed. "This could take a while." "That's why we didn't schedule anything." I liked Megan.

We started around the shelter property. At first, the dog pulled. Not hard enough to drag me. Hard enough to make his enthusiasm obvious. I stopped. He reached the end of the leash. Looked back. I waited. He looked toward whatever he'd wanted to investigate. Then back at me. The leash loosened. I walked. He came with me. Twenty feet later, something else smelled important. Pull. Stop. Look back. Wait. Loose leash. Walk. We repeated this several times. Megan stayed behind us. "He's learning quickly," she said. "So am I." "What's he teaching you?" "Apparently every bush deserves individual consideration." The dog buried his nose beneath one. "Some more than others."

We passed the outdoor runs. Several dogs barked. His ears lifted. He looked toward them. Tail neutral. Interested. Not frightened. Not challenging. One dog rushed its fence barking. He stopped. I stopped with him. He watched. Then looked at me. I moved away. He followed.

"Good," Megan said. I glanced back. "Me or him?" "Both." "Excellent. I enjoy positive reinforcement."

The public trail began behind a small park less than half a mile from the shelter. Nothing difficult. Packed dirt. Some roots. Gentle elevation. Trees on both sides. Exactly what I wanted. Not because it would prove anything. One easy trail couldn't tell me what this dog would do after ten miles, in rain, around wildlife, beside traffic, or after sleeping outdoors for several nights. But it could tell me something. And something was more useful than imagining. The moment we entered the trees, his pace changed. He stopped pulling. Not completely. But enough that I noticed. His nose still worked constantly, but now he moved forward. Sniff. Walk. Sniff. Walk. Pause. Listen. Walk. His entire body seemed occupied. I knew the feeling.

We reached a fork. I stopped. The dog stopped too. Two trails. Both eventually reconnected. I looked left. Then right. The dog looked left. Right. Sniffed. Then chose left. I looked at Megan. "Scientific method?" "Absolutely." We went left.

The trail narrowed. The dog moved ahead of me, then dropped back when the path became uneven. Not because I'd taught him to. He simply adjusted. At a muddy patch, he stepped directly into the center. I went around. He looked at me. "No." His paws sank slightly. He seemed delighted. "That's going to become my problem eventually, isn't it?" Megan smiled. "Almost certainly." The dog stepped out of the mud. Then shook. Mud droplets flew. I looked down at my pants. The dog looked up. Tongue out. "Excellent."

We continued. A squirrel ran across the trail. Everything changed. The dog's head snapped up. Ears forward. Body tense. The leash tightened. I stopped. He stared into the brush. The squirrel climbed. His eyes followed it. I waited. No yelling. No jerking him backward. Just wait. Eventually he looked at me. "That was a squirrel." He looked back toward the tree. "Yes. Still a squirrel." The leash loosened. We continued. Megan said, "Prey interest." "I noticed." "Manageable so far." "So far." That mattered. A trail dog didn't need to ignore wildlife. That would be asking a dog not to be a dog. But he did need to be manageable around it. Especially if we encountered something more interesting than a squirrel. Which, to a dog, could be almost anything.

We walked another mile. The dog settled into a rhythm. So did I. At some point, I stopped evaluating every step. That surprised me. For several minutes, we simply walked. His shoulder stayed ahead of my leg. Leash loose most of the time. Every now and then he'd stop to investigate something. I let him. Then we'd continue. It was pleasant. That was dangerous.

We reached a small wooden bridge. The dog stopped. I kept the leash loose. He looked at the boards. Sniffed. Put one paw on. Pulled it back. Interesting. Megan stayed behind us. “Has he crossed one before?” “Not with me.” I stepped onto the bridge. He watched. I crossed two boards. Stopped. The dog remained where he was. I didn’t call him. Didn’t pull. I waited. He put one paw on the bridge. Then another. The boards made a hollow sound. He backed off. “Fair.” I stood. Eventually he tried again. One paw. Two. Pause. Then all four. He walked toward me. Halfway across, he stopped and looked through the side at the creek below. His head tilted. Water moved over stones. He leaned slightly. I shortened the leash enough to keep him safely away from the edge without pulling him back. “Water.” He looked at me. Then down. Then at me. “Yes. Fascinating.” He crossed. On the other side, he immediately attempted to descend the bank toward the creek. “No.” He looked back. “Admire from here.” He seemed disappointed. But he followed.

We stopped near the water farther along where access was safe. The dog approached carefully. Sniffed. Touched his nose to the surface. Sneezed. I laughed. He tried again. Then drank. I watched how much. How quickly. Something else to learn. A large dog traveling miles every day needed water. A lot of it. Streams helped. Streams also couldn’t always be trusted. Treatment. Carrying capacity. Route planning. Hot weather. I could feel arithmetic beginning in the back of my mind again. I pushed it aside. Not yet. Today was a walk.

The dog finished drinking. Then stepped into the creek. One paw. Two. All four. The water barely reached his ankles. He looked down. Moved one paw. Watched the water change around it. Moved another. Then pounced. Water splashed everywhere. I stared. He pounced again. Apparently the creek had attacked. He retaliated. Megan laughed. The dog snapped playfully at a splash. “Very dignified.” He pounced again. I stepped farther from the water. “You’re walking back with her.” Megan shook her head. “Your leash.” “Temporary administrative error.”

Eventually we convinced him that the creek had been sufficiently defeated. We continued. Wet paws. Wet legs. Mud. Tail swinging. Tongue hanging sideways. He looked delighted. I realized I was smiling. I stopped. The dog stopped. Looked back. “What?” He approached. Sniffed my hand. Then started walking again. I followed. That was also dangerous.

A family approached from the opposite direction. Two adults. Two children. Another dog. I shortened the leash. Not tight. Just closer. Our dog noticed theirs immediately. His tail rose slightly. Ears forward. He slowed. The other dog barked once. He stopped. Megan moved closer. “Let’s give them space.” We stepped off the trail where the ground allowed. I positioned myself between the dogs. The family passed. The

other dog pulled toward us. Ours watched. Body alert. No growl. No bark. He looked at me once. Then back at the dog. When they were safely past, I waited. He sniffed where they'd walked. Then continued. I exhaled. Megan nodded. "Good." "Again, me or him?" "Mostly him." "I'll take partial credit."

A little farther on, one of the children from the family came running back. "Wait!" The adults called after him. He stopped several feet away. "Can I pet your dog?" I looked at Megan. She nodded slightly but let me handle it. "Maybe. Stand there for a second." The boy stopped. The dog watched him. Tail moved. I crouched beside the dog. "Let him decide." The boy held out a hand. Not in the dog's face. Good. The dog approached. Sniff. Tail faster. Then the large head shoved under the boy's hand. Permission granted. The boy scratched his ears. The dog leaned. The boy staggered. I caught the harness. "He's got some enthusiasm." The boy laughed. The dog's tongue appeared. The adults caught up. They apologized. No harm done. The boy returned to his family. Our dog watched them leave. Then looked at me. "Friendly." Tail. "Also structurally inconsiderate." Tongue.

We reached the loop junction around noon. Megan checked the time. "Want to head back?" I looked at the dog. He was panting lightly. Still alert. Still interested. Not tired. "How far have we gone?" "Little over three miles." I thought. Three miles wasn't much. Not for me. For a dog whose recent exercise had mostly happened in a shelter yard, it was enough. "Back." We turned. The dog did not object. That mattered too.

On the return trip, he walked closer. Not perfectly. A smell could still pull him several feet sideways. A bird still required investigation. A chipmunk nearly caused diplomatic failure. But the frantic excitement was gone. He seemed to understand that the trail wasn't disappearing. There would always be another smell. Another tree. Another bend. I understood that too.

Near the bridge, I stopped. Something had changed in the light. Clouds were moving across the sun, leaving the creek in shade while a patch of forest beyond the bridge remained bright. I looked. That might work. My hand moved toward the camera. Then stopped. I had a leash in it. The dog looked up. Right. New logistical problem. I could hand him to Megan. I almost did. Then I looked at the scene again. The light was already moving. "Could you?" Megan took the leash. I planted my staff, steadied the camera, framed the bridge and waited. The dog watched me. The bright patch moved. Almost. The creek caught a little reflected light. Better. Click. I checked it. Not quite. Wait. The dog sat beside Megan. The sun shifted. Click. There. Keeper. I lowered the camera. The dog was still watching. I took the leash back. "That's going to

require adjustment." "What?" "Photography with a dog." Megan smiled. "You'll figure it out." I noticed the wording. I didn't comment.

We returned to the shelter after nearly four hours. The dog recognized the driveway. His pace slowed. Only slightly. But it slowed. I noticed. Megan probably did too. We entered the yard. She unclipped the leash. He drank. Then wandered toward the pinecone. Same pinecone? Possibly. He nosed it. Pushed it. Then abandoned it. He came over to me instead. I sat on the bench. He stood between my knees. I scratched the sides of his neck. He leaned. I was prepared this time. Mostly. "You did well." His tongue lolled sideways. "Your fetch remains unacceptable." Tail. "And your relationship with squirrels requires discussion." Tail. "Creeks..." He looked toward the yard. "We'll revisit creeks."

Megan sat beside me. Neither of us spoke for a while. Finally she asked, "Still just looking?" "No." There wasn't much point lying anymore. She waited. "I'm thinking." "That's allowed." "I like him." "Seems mutual." "That's not enough." "No." Good. She understood. I looked at the dog. "If I take him, everything changes." "Some things." "Food." "Yes." "Water." "Yes." "Where I can go." "Sometimes." "How far." "Sometimes." "Where I sleep." "Sometimes." "Vet appointments." "Definitely." "Can't just disappear down a trail without planning anymore." "You shouldn't be doing that now." I looked at her. "Fair."

I rubbed the dog's chest. He sat. Then leaned against my leg. "I've built my life around carrying what I need." Megan nodded. "He'll add weight." "A lot." "You could put a pack on him eventually." I looked at the dog. He looked back. "Make him carry his own food?" "Some of it, once he's conditioned and a vet clears him for the workload. Properly fitted pack. Gradual introduction." I considered that. The dog sneezed. "He's skeptical." "He's a union dog." "Apparently." Even with a pack, there were limits. A dog wasn't equipment. I wouldn't load him down simply because I didn't want to carry something. But eventually he could carry a modest amount appropriate to his size and condition. That helped. Not enough. But some.

"What happens if I say yes?" Megan explained. Application. Review. Adoption fee. Medical records. Food transition. Identification. Leash. Harness. Supplies. A mountain of practical details. I listened. This wasn't finding a dog in the woods and deciding it belonged to me. Good. It shouldn't be. He had been lost once already. If he left here with me, I wanted the shelter to be confident he wasn't going to become lost again.

I filled out the application. That felt strange. Name. Contact information. Travel situation. Experience with animals. Veterinary plans. Housing. Emergency contact. I reached the line: Pet's name: Bear had been written lightly beside it. I stared. Then crossed it out. Megan watched. "You don't like Bear." "He doesn't look like a Bear." "What does he look

like?" I looked at him. He was trying to catch a fly. Missed. Turned. Tried again. Missed. Then became distracted by his own tail. "I don't know yet." "Fair." I left the line blank.

The shelter couldn't finalize everything immediately. That was fine. Actually, I preferred it. Megan wanted another staff member to review the application, and I needed supplies if I was seriously considering leaving with a dog. Food alone required thought. I wasn't equipped. Not yet. So I did something difficult. I left again.

This time, when I walked away from the shelter, I didn't pretend I wasn't coming back. I headed into town. There was a pet supply section in the general store. I stood in front of the dog food. There was too much dog food. I had previously believed dog food came in approximately three categories. Dog food. Expensive dog food. Food your dog stole from you. I had been mistaken. I read labels. Compared calorie density. Looked at bag weights. Calculated how many days I could reasonably carry. Then recalculated. "You're enormous." A woman farther down the aisle looked at me. I pointed at the bags. "Dog." She nodded. "Sure." I decided it was better not to explain.

I bought enough food for several days. Collapsible bowls. A sturdy leash. Waste bags. A basic grooming brush. A few other necessities. I did not buy a dog backpack. Not yet. That required fitting. I did not buy six toys. I bought one. Then put it back. Then picked it up again. Rubber ball. Durable. Probably. "One." The ball went into the basket.

At the register, I looked at everything. This was no longer hypothetical. I paid. My pack was considerably heavier when I left. I walked half a block. Stopped. Adjusted the straps. Walked again. "That's noticeable." And this wasn't enough food for a long remote stretch. I knew immediately that our routes would have to change. Shorter distances between resupply. More planning. Possibly transportation occasionally. Different choices. I should have found that irritating. Instead, I found myself thinking about the dog standing in the creek attacking water. I smiled. "You're going to be expensive."

I stayed near town that night. For the first time in years, I planned the next several days more carefully than usual. Not because I knew I was adopting him. I still had the right to decide no. So did the shelter. But if the answer became yes, I wanted to be ready. I marked towns. Water. Road crossings. Possible campsites. Veterinary clinics. I even looked at weather. The next several days were mild. Good. I opened my notebook. Under yesterday's notes I wrote: Trail: good. Other dogs: alert, manageable. Children: friendly. Possibly too friendly. Wildlife: interested. Training needed. Water: apparently mortal enemy. Then: Does not like returning to kennel. I stopped. That one hurt. I closed the notebook.

I opened the pirate novel instead. The stolen map had been recovered. Unfortunately, it was now wet. The ink was running. “See?” I pointed at the page. “This is why we protect maps.” Nobody appreciated the lesson. I kept reading.

The next morning I woke before sunrise. Not unusual. What was unusual was that I packed immediately. Coffee first. Obviously. There were still standards. Then camp came down. Everything went into the pack. Dog food had to be redistributed twice before the weight felt reasonable. I attached the new leash outside the pack where I could reach it. Then stared at it. That looked strange. A leash. My leash. Possibly. I shook my head. “You’re getting ahead of yourself.” I started toward the shelter.

Megan wasn’t at the desk when I arrived. Another employee was. He looked at me. “Can I help you?” “I’m here about a dog.” “Which one?” I almost said Bear. Couldn’t. “The big dark one. Shaggy. About a hundred and fifteen pounds.” He smiled. “Oh. That guy.” “Apparently.” “You’re Bone?” I paused. “Yes.” “Megan said you’d probably be back.” “Did she.” He seemed amused. I was beginning to suspect the shelter staff had been discussing me. Reasonable. A skeleton with a backpack applying to adopt a hundred-pound dog probably made the morning meeting. “Application’s approved,” he said. That happened too quickly. Not administratively. Emotionally. I stood there. “Approved.” “Yep.” “Oh.” He tilted his head. “You okay?” “Apparently.”

Megan appeared from the hallway. “Morning.” “You knew.” “I did.” “You could’ve warned me.” “About what?” I gestured vaguely. “This.” She smiled. “You submitted the application.” “Technicality.” “Want to see him?” I looked toward the kennel area. “Yes.” That answer required no thought.

He was in the yard. Megan brought him out while I waited. The door opened. He saw me. Stopped. For half a second, nothing happened. Then his entire rear half began moving. Not just the tail. Everything. He ran toward me. I braced. Good decision. One hundred and fifteen pounds of dog arrived. His head hit my chest. His front paws came off the ground. “Absolutely not.” I caught him by the harness. Megan laughed. “Down.” The dog remained enthusiastic. “Four feet.” Eventually all four returned to earth. His tail continued trying to remove nearby vegetation. I scratched his neck. “Hello.” He pushed his head into me. “Yes. I came back.”

We spent another hour going over everything. Records. Vaccinations. Feeding. Transition. Signs of stress. Training resources. Identification. What to watch for during the first days. The dog stayed nearby. Sometimes leaning against me. Sometimes wandering. Sometimes returning to check that I was still there. Then came the question. “What are you naming him?” I looked at Megan. Then at the dog. “I don’t know.” She

smiled. “You’ve had two days.” “I’ve known him two days.” “Fair.” The dog wandered toward the edge of the yard. Something moved in the grass. He investigated. Then another smell caught him. He followed it. Then another. He moved from one discovery to the next with the same enthusiasm he’d shown on the trail. I watched. Megan waited. He returned. I clipped on the leash. “Come on.” He looked up. We walked toward the gate. He surged ahead. Not pulling hard. Just eager. I stopped. He looked back. “You’re always trying to get to the next trail, aren’t you?” Tail. I smiled. “Little trailblazer.” The word came out without planning. I stopped. The dog tilted his head. Megan said nothing. “Trailblazer.” Tail. I looked at him. “That’s too long.” His tongue fell sideways. “Blaze?” Both ears moved. I waited. “Blaze.” The tail accelerated. Megan smiled. “That might be it.” I crouched. “Blaze.” He stepped toward me. Maybe he recognized the sound. Maybe he liked my voice. Maybe there was a squirrel behind me. It didn’t matter. I scratched beneath his chin. “Blaze.” The name felt right. Not because he’d told me. He couldn’t. Because it described something I’d already seen. A dog who wanted to go. To explore. To see what was around the next bend. A little trailblazer. Blaze.

Megan changed the paperwork. Name: Blaze I watched her write it. That made it real in a way I hadn’t expected. Bear disappeared. Blaze remained. She handed me the leash. Not the shelter leash. Mine. I clipped it to his harness. He looked toward the gate. Then back at me. “Ready?” He wagged. I opened the gate.

I had walked into the shelter alone. I walked out with Blaze. There was no dramatic music. No crowd. No sudden certainty that I’d made the perfect decision. Just morning sunlight. A road. A backpack that was heavier than it had been two days earlier. And a very large dog trying to smell three things simultaneously. We reached the end of the driveway. I stopped. For years, when I reached a road, the question had been simple. Where did I want to go? I looked down. Blaze was sniffing the grass. The question had changed. Not completely. Just enough. “Well.” He looked up. “Where should we go?” Blaze chose a direction immediately. North. I looked south. Then at him. “Strong opinion.” He pulled gently north. I laughed. “Fine.” We went north.

We made it perhaps a quarter mile. Blaze stopped at a bush. Sniffed. Continued. Stopped at another. Sniffed. Then a tree. Then a rock. Then a patch of dirt apparently containing information unavailable anywhere else on Earth. I waited. This was going to take adjustment. Eventually he looked at me. “Done?” He started walking. “Good.” Twenty feet later he stopped again. I sighed. “Some trails are going to take longer now.” His tail wagged. I couldn’t really argue with that. Some Trails Are Traveled Alone, Some Trails Are Traveled Together

CHAPTER 10

The One Who Came Back

There were many kinds of footsteps. Blaze knew this. He did not know Blaze yet. That sound belonged to the future. For now, there were footsteps. Some were quick. Some dragged. Some came with the rattle of keys. Some stopped at every kennel. Some never stopped at his. There were the familiar footsteps of the people who brought food, cleaned the floor, opened the door to the yard, touched him gently and made the sounds he had learned belonged to him. Bear. That was one of those sounds. Bear meant look. Bear meant come. Bear meant sometimes food. Bear meant sometimes outside. He knew the sound. He had never particularly cared about it. There were other footsteps too. Strange ones. They came through the door at the far end of the building. Sometimes they smelled like other dogs. Sometimes cats. Children. Food. Rain. Cars. Places beyond the building. Those footsteps interested him. They also made him cautious. Because sometimes they stopped. And sometimes they didn't.

The kennel was not home. Blaze didn't have a word for home. But he knew this wasn't it. Home was something remembered more by feeling than place. A place where sleep was deep. Where sounds belonged. Where smells remained long enough to become ordinary. The shelter was never ordinary. Too many smells. Too many voices. Too many dogs. Too many doors. Every day something changed. A dog disappeared. Another arrived. A person walked through. Another left. Food came. Bowls went. Lights came on. Lights went off. Sometimes the building became quiet. Never completely. Someone always moved. Someone always scratched. Someone always sighed. Someone always barked because someone else had barked. Sometimes Blaze participated. Especially when the building became too quiet. A good howl could improve things considerably. The humans did not always agree.

He had learned something else. People looked. They stood outside the kennel and looked at him. Some made high sounds. Some crouched. Some put fingers toward the door. Some smelled nervous. Some smelled excited. Some smelled strongly of other dogs. Blaze smelled them back.

Sometimes he approached. Sometimes he didn't. There was no reason to hurry. People usually left. So Blaze had learned to watch first. Nose around the partition. Eyes. Ears. Information. Then decide.

One morning, new footsteps entered the kennel room. Slow. Steady. Different. Blaze lifted his head. The other dogs announced the visitor immediately. Pepper bounced. The little white dog objected. Winston got up. Everyone had an opinion. Blaze stayed where he was. He listened. Two sets of footsteps. One familiar. Megan. One not. The unfamiliar footsteps stopped often. That was interesting. Most people moved through the row in one of two ways. Quickly, looking everywhere. Or slowly, making noises at every dog. These footsteps stopped. Waited. Moved. Stopped. Waited. Blaze stood. Sniffed. Dog. Many dogs. Food. Coffee. Rain. Dirt. Wood smoke. Leather. Canvas. Forest. Water. Something metallic. Paper. Cheese. Blaze moved closer to the partition. Definitely cheese. He pushed his nose around the edge. There. A person. Strange person. Hat. Pack. Long piece of wood. The person looked at him. Blaze withdrew.

He waited. The person did not leave. Blaze looked again. Still there. The person made a sound. Low. Quiet. Not the bright excited noises people sometimes made when they saw him. Just a sound. Blaze listened. The person crouched. But did not come closer. Interesting. Blaze stepped out. The person stayed. Another step. Still stayed. Blaze smelled the air. Outside. The stranger smelled more like outside than anyone who had come through the kennel recently. Not outside for an hour. Not outside from a car to a door. Outside. Many outsides. Wet ground. Trees. Smoke. Old leaves. Road. Something sweet. Something that had once been near a river. Blaze moved closer. The stranger's pack smelled even better. Cheese. Definitely cheese. Blaze investigated. The stranger made another sound. Then Blaze sneezed. The stranger's face changed. Good change. Blaze's tail moved.

Then the door opened. Outside. Blaze forgot everything else.

Grass. Post. Fence. Leaf. Different grass. Old dog smell. New dog smell. Bird. Pinecone. Blaze pushed it. It moved. He pounced. It moved again. Excellent. He chased it. The stranger came outside too. Blaze noticed. Then went back to the pinecone. There were priorities.

The stranger walked. Blaze watched. The stranger turned. Blaze followed. Then another smell interrupted. Blaze investigated. When he looked again, the stranger was still there. Good. He followed again. The stranger stopped. Blaze stopped. The stranger moved. Blaze moved. This was interesting. Then the stranger sat. Blaze continued exploring. There was no need to stay beside him. He wasn't going anywhere. Probably. Blaze checked. Still there. He explored farther. Checked again. Still there. Eventually Blaze walked over. The stranger offered a hand.

Blaze smelled it carefully. Forest. Wood. Metal. Food. Something from the river. And underneath everything else, the stranger. Blaze pushed his head beneath the hand. The hand scratched behind his ear. Good. Very good. Blaze leaned. The stranger moved slightly. Blaze leaned more. The stranger made a sound. Megan laughed. Blaze did not know why. The scratching continued. That was enough. Then Blaze left. The pinecone remained unfinished business.

There was a ball. Blaze liked the ball. The stranger threw it. Blaze ran. Caught it. Turned. The stranger was waiting. Blaze ran toward him. Then saw a better place to put the ball. He went there instead. The stranger apparently misunderstood. He walked over and threw it again. Blaze chased it. This was an excellent arrangement. The stranger did most of the retrieving.

Later, Blaze lay near the stranger's feet. Not touching. Close. The stranger and Megan made many sounds. Blaze recognized some. Food. Walk. Dog. Training. Bear. That sound again. Blaze opened his eyes. The stranger looked at him when Megan made the Bear sound. Then the stranger made another sound. Different tone. Blaze's tail moved. He didn't know why. Eventually the stranger scratched behind his ear again. Then they went back inside.

Blaze knew the kennel before he reached it. The smell changed first. Then the sound. Then the door. He slowed. The yard was behind him. The kennel was ahead. The stranger was still there. Blaze went inside. The door closed. He turned. The stranger crouched. Made quiet sounds. Blaze watched. Then the stranger stood. Walked away. Blaze remained at the door. Three kennels. The stranger stopped. Looked back. Blaze watched. Then the stranger disappeared.

The day continued. Food. Water. People. Doors. Barking. The little white dog remained angry about something. Pepper continued attempting to defeat gravity. Winston slept. Blaze waited. He did not know he was waiting. There was simply a smell that had been there. And now it wasn't. Eventually the lights changed. The building quieted. Blaze slept.

The next morning brought footsteps. Many footsteps. Familiar footsteps. Food footsteps. Cleaning footsteps. Door footsteps. Blaze stood. Listened. Nothing. He ate. He drank. He went outside. Came back. Time passed. Then... There. Blaze lifted his head. Footsteps. Slow. Steady. And before the smell reached him, he knew. He moved toward the front of the kennel. The footsteps came closer. The outside-smelling stranger appeared. Again. Blaze's tail moved. The stranger had come back. People did that. Staff did. Megan did. The people who belonged to the building left and returned. But strangers? Strangers usually disappeared. This one had returned. Blaze stepped forward. The stranger had something in his hand. Leash. Outside. Blaze howled.

Outside was different this time. They did not stay in the yard. They walked away from the building. Blaze moved quickly. There was too much. Grass. Bush. Post. Old dog. Bird. Another dog. Something had been here last night. Something else had been here this morning. Blaze needed information. The stranger stopped. Blaze reached the end of the leash. He pulled. Nothing. He looked back. The stranger waited. Blaze stopped pulling. The stranger walked. Blaze followed. Then there was another smell. Pull. Stop. Look. Wait. Walk. Blaze began to understand. There was time. The smells weren't going anywhere. Probably.

Then came the trees. Blaze knew trees. But these were not the trees beside the shelter. This was a place full of them. The ground was dirt. Real dirt. Wet in places. Leaves. Roots. Animals. So many animals. Most invisible. Blaze could smell where they had been. Something had crossed here. Something had climbed there. Something had urinated on that bush and apparently considered the matter important enough to announce. Blaze investigated thoroughly. The stranger kept walking. Blaze followed. The farther they went, the easier it became. Walk. Sniff. Listen. Walk. The stranger was behind him. Sometimes beside him. Always there. Blaze stopped checking as often.

Then the squirrel happened. Blaze froze. Movement. Small. Fast. Up. Blaze knew exactly what needed to happen. Forward. The leash disagreed. He stared into the tree. The squirrel was there. He could smell it. Hear it. See movement. The stranger waited. Blaze looked back. The stranger made a sound. Calm. Blaze looked at the squirrel again. Still squirrel. Nothing had improved. But the stranger began walking. Blaze followed. This required significant sacrifice.

Then came the bridge. Blaze stopped. Wrong ground. Wood. Water underneath. Hollow sound. The stranger walked onto it. Blaze did not. The stranger stopped. No pulling. No command. No reaching. Just waiting. Blaze sniffed the wood. One paw. Sound. Back. The stranger remained there. Blaze watched. The stranger was standing on the wrong ground. Nothing happened. Blaze tried again. One paw. Two. Four. The wood held. He walked. Halfway across, he looked down. Water. Interesting. Very interesting. He leaned. The leash shortened. Not hard. Just enough. Blaze looked at the stranger. Then at the water. The stranger made a sound. Blaze crossed. On the other side he immediately attempted to reach the water. The stranger disagreed. Blaze began to suspect the stranger had too many opinions.

Later, they found better water. Blaze drank. Cold. Moving. Good. Then he stepped in. The water moved around his paw. Blaze moved the paw again. The water did it again. He struck it. Water jumped. Blaze attacked. The water attacked back. This was excellent. He pounced. Water everywhere. Again. Again. The stranger moved farther away. Megan made

happy sounds. Blaze continued until victory was sufficiently established.

There were people. A dog. Blaze saw the dog first. The other dog saw him. Bark. Blaze watched. The stranger moved. Blaze moved with him. They waited. The other dog passed. Blaze smelled where it had been. Information acquired. Continue. Then a small human returned. Fast. Blaze watched. The stranger stopped the small human. Good. The small human waited. Better. Blaze approached. Smelled. Safe. Hand. Blaze pushed his head beneath it. Scratch. Good. He leaned. The small human moved unexpectedly. The stranger steadied Blaze. Blaze wagged. Everyone made happy sounds. Good encounter.

They walked for a long time. Not too long. Blaze could have continued. There was always another smell. Another turn. Another animal somewhere beyond sight. But eventually they turned back. Blaze followed. That was fine. The trail remained. It would be there again. Maybe.

The stranger stopped near the bridge. Handed the leash to Megan. Then took out the small black object he'd carried. Blaze had noticed it before. The stranger held it toward things sometimes. Waited. Stayed very still. A tiny sound. Then moved again. Blaze sat beside Megan. The stranger put the long piece of wood against the ground and leaned slightly toward it. Waited. Tiny sound. Waited. Tiny sound. Then the black object disappeared. The stranger took the leash. They continued. Blaze understood none of this. It seemed harmless.

The shelter appeared again. Blaze smelled it before he saw it. His pace slowed. The stranger noticed. They went into the yard. Blaze drank. Pinecone. Still there. He checked. Yes. Then he went to the stranger. The stranger sat. Blaze stood between his legs. Hands scratched his neck. Good. The stranger made many sounds. Megan answered. Blaze didn't understand most of them. Then the stranger left. Again. Blaze watched. Again.

That night the outside smell remained faintly on Blaze's fur. Forest. Creek. Mud. Stranger. He slept.

Morning. Footsteps. Not the stranger. Food. Later. Footsteps. Not the stranger. Door. Dog. People. Time. Blaze waited without knowing he waited. Then footsteps. Blaze stood. Not Megan. Not food. Slow. Steady. There. The stranger. Again. Blaze moved forward. The stranger came back. Again. Something inside Blaze changed. Not dramatically. There was no single thought. No understanding of applications or adoption or promises. Just a pattern. The stranger left. The stranger returned. The stranger left. The stranger returned. Patterns mattered. Patterns could become trust.

The stranger smelled different this morning. Blaze approached. Sniff. Dog food. A lot of dog food. Blaze sniffed harder. There were other things. Rubber. New fabric. New leash. Bowls. Blaze looked up. The stranger made a sound. Blaze wagged. Something was happening.

They went to the yard. Blaze explored. The stranger stayed. People made many sounds. Paper moved. Pen scratched. Megan said Bear. The stranger made a different sound. Blaze watched him. Then the stranger looked directly at Blaze. “Trailblazer.” Blaze tilted his head. Sound. New sound. The stranger looked pleased. “Blaze?” Blaze’s ears moved. “Blaze.” The sound came again. Short. Clear. Warm. Blaze stepped closer. The stranger scratched beneath his chin. “Blaze.” There. Again. Blaze. The sound happened when the stranger looked at him. Blaze. The sound came with the hand. Blaze. The sound came with attention. Blaze. He didn’t know what it meant. Not yet. But he knew it was his.

The new leash clipped to his harness. The gate opened. Blaze walked through. The stranger came too. They passed the yard. Passed the building. Down the driveway. Blaze expected the turn. The place where walks became returns. It didn’t happen. They reached the road. The stranger stopped. Blaze sniffed. North smelled interesting. He went north. The stranger followed. Blaze walked. Bush. Tree. Rock. Dirt. Another bush. The world unfolded ahead of him one smell at a time. He looked back. The stranger was there. Blaze continued. A little farther. Look back. Still there. He walked again. The shelter smell grew weaker behind them. Blaze did not turn around. Neither did Bone. And for the first time in longer than Blaze could remember, they just kept going. Some Trails Are Traveled Alone, Some Trails Are Traveled Together

CHAPTER 11

The Weight of Two

Blaze had been mine for forty-seven minutes when he attempted to eat something dead. I didn't know what it was. I didn't want to know what it was. Blaze did. Very much. "No." He looked up at me. Then down. Then up. "No." His nose lowered. "Blaze." The new name stopped him. That was encouraging. One floppy ear lifted. I pointed away from the unidentified object. "Leave it." He stared at me. I stared at him. Somewhere in the grass lay whatever had started this negotiation. Blaze considered his options. Then stepped away. "Good." His tail wagged. I gave him one of the treats Megan had sent with us. He ate it. Then immediately looked toward the dead thing. "No." Apparently one successful training exercise did not constitute a finished education. We continued walking. Forty-eight minutes.

I had adopted a dog. That sentence kept occurring to me. Not because I'd forgotten. There was a hundred and fifteen pounds of evidence attached to my left hand. But every few minutes the reality of it arrived again. I had adopted a dog. Blaze stopped to smell a tree. I waited. A dog. My dog. He finished with the tree and moved to a bush. My extremely slow dog. "Eventually, we do need to reach somewhere." Blaze sniffed deeper into the bush. Apparently that was my problem.

We weren't going far. That was deliberate. I could normally cover considerably more ground, but Blaze had spent weeks in a shelter. One moderate trail walk didn't mean he was conditioned for my daily mileage. So I'd chosen a campsite only several miles away. Easy terrain. Reliable water nearby. Close enough to town that if something went wrong, I could turn around. For years, route planning had been mostly about what I could manage. Distance. Weather. Water. Food. Terrain. Now there was another question. What could we manage? I wasn't sure yet. So we started small.

Blaze seemed entirely unconcerned with this new philosophy. The world was enormous. Everything required investigation. A culvert. Grass. A feather. Another dog's paw prints. A crushed paper cup. A beetle. A suspicious patch of dirt. At one point, he stopped so abruptly that I

nearly walked into him. “What?” He stared into the brush. I followed his gaze. Nothing. Blaze’s nose moved. His ears shifted forward. I waited. Then something rustled. Blaze leaned toward it. The leash tightened. “Leave it.” He didn’t. “Blaze.” He looked at me. I stepped backward. “Come on.” Another rustle. Blaze looked toward the brush. Then at me. Brush. Me. The decision was visibly painful. Finally he came. “Good.” Treat. Blaze ate it. Then looked at the brush again. I began to understand that dog training consisted largely of repeatedly convincing an animal that you were more interesting than whatever the universe had placed nearby. This seemed ambitious.

The first real problem appeared less than two hours after leaving the shelter. Water. Not finding it. Carrying it. I had enough. That wasn’t the issue. The issue was how quickly enough became less than enough when another mouth was involved. We stopped in the shade. I unfolded Blaze’s new bowl and poured water into it. He drank. And drank. And drank. I watched the level fall. “That’s impressive.” He continued. I looked at my remaining water. Then at him. He finished and looked up. “No.” Tail. “That’s all for now.” He licked the empty bowl. I packed it away. The arithmetic I’d been avoiding returned immediately. One hundred and fifteen pounds of dog. Daily mileage. Warm weather. Dry stretches. Food. Water. My pack. I lifted it. The extra weight was already obvious. This worked here. Near towns. Near streams. On short routes. It would not work everywhere. Not the way I’d been traveling. I looked at Blaze. He was lying in the shade, tongue hanging sideways, perfectly content. “You’ve complicated things.” Tail thump. I smiled. “Don’t look so proud.” Another thump.

We reached a creek shortly afterward. I checked the map. Right where it was supposed to be. I appreciated competent cartography more every year. Blaze heard the water. His pace increased. “No aquatic warfare.” He looked back. I had no idea whether he understood any part of that sentence. Probably not. We approached at a safe, accessible section. I let him drink after making sure the water wasn’t obviously stagnant or contaminated, but I still treated the water I collected for carrying. Blaze finished drinking. Then stepped into the creek. “Blaze.” One paw. Two. “Remember yesterday?” All four. Apparently he did. He pawed the surface. Splash. “Blaze.” Splash. He snapped at the water. I moved backward. “You’re on your own.” Blaze pounced. Water exploded around him. I laughed. He pounced again. Then he turned toward me. I saw it happen. The body lowered. The weight shifted. “No.” Blaze launched out of the creek. “Don’t.” He shook. There are moments in life when you understand exactly what’s about to happen and remain completely incapable of preventing it. Water flew in every direction. I closed my eyes. When I opened them, Blaze stood beside me looking delighted. I

looked at my wet shirt. Then at him. “We’ve known each other less than a day.” Tongue. “Boundaries.” Tail.

We stopped for lunch beside the creek. Blaze received measured food according to the shelter’s instructions. I received bread and cheese. He finished first. Naturally. Then he sat beside me. I ate. He watched. I took another bite. His eyes followed the cheese. “No.” Blaze looked at me. Then the cheese. “You have food.” His bowl was empty. He looked at it. Then at me. “That isn’t evidence.” I ate another piece. Blaze moved closer. “Absolutely not.” He sat. Very straight. Perfect posture. Floppy ears. Large eyes. The expression of an animal who had never been fed in his entire life. I stared at him. “You’re good.” Tail. “Still no.” I finished the cheese. Blaze sighed. A genuine sigh. I laughed. “That was theatrical.” He lay down with his back toward me. Apparently our relationship had suffered its first major betrayal.

I took out the pirate novel. Blaze slept. For perhaps twenty minutes, everything became remarkably normal. Creek. Trees. Book. Dog. I read. Blaze’s paws twitched occasionally. Dreaming. I wondered what dogs dreamed about. Probably smells. Maybe squirrels. Possibly murdering creeks. I turned a page. Blaze opened one eye. I kept reading. The eye closed. Something about the scene felt strange. Not bad. Just different. For years, I’d sat in places exactly like this alone. I’d never considered them lonely. They still weren’t. But there was breathing beside me now. A warm body stretched in the grass. An ear that moved whenever the forest made an unfamiliar sound. Presence. That was the difference. I read another page. Blaze snored. Loudly. “Beautiful.” The snoring continued.

We started walking again when the afternoon cooled. Blaze’s pace was slower now. Not tired exactly. Settled. He stopped less often. Walked closer. The leash hung loose between us for longer stretches. I began learning his rhythm. He began learning mine. Or perhaps we were inventing a new one.

We encountered a cyclist. I heard the bicycle behind us first. I moved off the trail. Blaze turned. The cyclist rang a bell. Blaze jumped sideways. Not far. But suddenly. I shortened the leash. “Easy.” The bicycle passed. Blaze watched it. Then tried to follow. “No.” He reached the end of the leash. Stopped. The cyclist disappeared. Blaze looked at me. “Bicycle.” His ears shifted. “We don’t chase those.” I had no reason to believe this explanation would survive the next bicycle. Still, expectations had been communicated.

A little later we found a fallen log beside the trail. I sat. Blaze stood. Then sat. Then stood again. Turned twice. Lay down. Got up. Sniffed the log. Sneezed. Walked around me. Then finally dropped at my feet. I

watched the process. “You could’ve started there.” Blaze rested his chin on my boot. That ended the discussion.

The campsite was exactly where the map indicated. Small. Primitive. Legal. Quiet. A flat clearing beneath trees with a designated fire ring and access to water a short walk away. No one else was there. Perfect. I set down my pack. Blaze immediately began inspecting the perimeter. I kept him leashed. That was going to remain non-negotiable until I knew his recall was reliable. He reached the end. Changed direction. Reached it again. Circled. Sniffed. Listened. Then returned to me. “Approved?” Tail. “I’ll inform management.”

Setting up camp with a dog was different. Mostly because the dog wanted to inspect every item as it appeared. Groundsheet. Sniff. Bedroll. Sniff. Cookware. Very interested sniff. Food bag. Extremely interested sniff. “Back.” Blaze backed up half a step. “Technically.” I moved the food. He followed. “No.” He sat. Good. I continued unpacking. When I looked back, he was still sitting. “Very good.” Tail. Treat. I was being trained too.

Then came the sleeping arrangement. I had assumed this would be simple. This was my first mistake. I arranged my bedding. Then Blaze’s. He sniffed his. Walked onto mine. “No.” He turned around. Lay down. “That’s mine.” Blaze rested his head. I pointed. “Yours is there.” Nothing. “Blaze.” One eye opened. I patted his bedding. He stood. Excellent. Walked over. Sniffed it. Then returned to mine. I stared. “Negotiations have broken down.” Eventually I moved his bedding closer to mine. Blaze considered this revised proposal. He lay down half on his bed and half off it. I accepted the compromise.

Dinner went better. Mostly. Blaze ate. I ate. He finished. Then watched me. I ignored him. He moved closer. Ignored. Closer. Ignored. His chin appeared on my knee. I looked down. “No.” His eyes moved toward my food. “No.” He looked back at me. “No.” He sighed. “You’re going to need another strategy.” He removed his chin. Then sat beside me. Not begging. Just existing. Very close. I finished dinner. Blaze received nothing. This felt like an important victory. For me. Blaze probably recorded it as incomplete research.

As evening settled, I made coffee. The air cooled. Blaze wandered to the end of the leash and stood facing the trees. His body changed. Still. Listening. I watched. “What?” His ears shifted. Nose lifted. Something was out there. Deer, maybe. Raccoon. Something smaller. I couldn’t see it. Blaze could smell it. Maybe hear it. He didn’t bark. He simply watched. That interested me. I joined him. Nothing. The forest remained forest. Eventually Blaze relaxed. Turned. Returned to camp. I scratched behind his ear. “Good.” He leaned against my leg. Heavy. Very heavy. “Still

standing here." He leaned harder. I adjusted my stance. This was apparently affection by structural engineering.

The light began to change. I noticed automatically. The sky beyond the trees had turned gold. Not spectacular. Not yet. But the clouds had edges. Possibility. I reached for the camera. Then looked at Blaze. Leash. Right. I looped it securely around my wrist and moved to the edge of camp. Blaze came with me. The view wasn't enough. Trees blocked most of the sky. I walked a short distance to a small opening I'd noticed near the creek. Blaze followed. The sunset reflected weakly in the water. Maybe. I framed it. Blaze pulled toward a smell. The camera moved. "No." He looked back. I tried again. Another smell. Pull. I lowered the camera. "This is going to be difficult." Blaze sniffed. I considered tying the leash to something. No. Not while I was still learning him. I could skip the photograph. Also no. I looked at the staff in my other hand. Then at Blaze. Then at a broad flat rock beside the creek. I sat. Staff planted between my knees. Leash shortened enough that Blaze could stand comfortably beside me but not wander into the frame or pull me off balance. Camera braced. Blaze sniffed the rock. I waited. The clouds shifted. Gold became orange. The creek darkened. Then the reflection appeared. Not bright. Just a thin ribbon of light between black trees. Blaze stopped moving. For whatever reason, he looked toward the water. I raised the camera. His silhouette entered the edge of the frame. I almost changed composition. Then stopped. Dark dog. Dark trees. Ribbon of reflected sky. Blaze's head slightly raised. One floppy ear outlined by light. I waited. He remained still. Click. I checked it. For several seconds I said nothing. Blaze looked at me. "Well." The photograph wasn't what I'd intended. It was better. Keeper. Definitely. My first photograph of Blaze outside the shelter. Not posed. Not adoption paperwork. Not proof that I'd acquired a dog. Just Blaze looking toward the light. I saved it.

Back at camp, darkness arrived quickly. I lit the fire. Blaze had opinions about fire. He approached. Stopped. Sniffed. Stepped sideways. Watched the flames. I kept him far enough away to be safe. He sat. The wood cracked. Blaze flinched. Looked at me. "Fire." He looked back. Another crack. Less reaction. Soon he lay beside me. Not too close. Smart dog.

I opened the pirate novel. Blaze put his head on my boot. I read. The captain had finally admitted he'd lied. This surprised nobody except the other characters. I turned a page. Blaze sighed. I looked down. His eyes were closed. The fire reflected faintly in his dark fur. For years, this had been my favorite part of the day. Fire. Book. Quiet. Nothing demanding anything from me. Nothing needing to be solved. Tonight wasn't quiet. Blaze breathed. Shifted. Snored once. Stopped. Then snored again. I smiled. Maybe quiet had more than one definition.

Later, I secured the food properly. Very properly. Blaze watched the entire process. “You’ve already demonstrated questionable dietary judgment.” Tail. “The answer remains no.” I checked the campsite perimeter. Checked the leash. Checked Blaze’s water. Checked him. Paws looked fine. No limping. No obvious irritation. He seemed tired. Good tired. Not exhausted. I’d chosen the distance correctly. That pleased me more than I expected.

Then came bedtime. I crawled into my bedroll. Blaze stood. His bedding was directly beside mine. I patted it. “Here.” He walked over. Turned. Lay down. Success. I settled. Closed my eyes. Thirty seconds. Movement. Blaze stood. I opened one eye. He walked around. Sniffed. Lay down again. I closed my eyes. Movement. “Blaze.” He stood. Turned. Lay down. I waited. Silence. Good. Then something moved in the forest. Blaze was instantly upright. I sat. He stared into darkness. No growl. No bark. Just alert. I listened. A rustle. Then another. Probably small. Blaze stayed still. Eventually the sound moved away. He looked at me. “Good.” I lay down. Blaze remained sitting. After a minute, he lay down too.

I woke sometime later because something heavy was against my side. I opened my eyes. Darkness. Fire almost out. Blaze had moved. His bedding was empty. He was pressed against me. Apparently sometime during the night, the negotiated sleeping arrangement had been amended without consultation. I considered moving him. Then didn’t. He was warm. The night was cold. I closed my eyes. “Fine.” His tail thumped once. He was awake. “You planned this.” Another thump. I went back to sleep.

Morning arrived with a nose in my face. I opened my eyes. Blaze stared at me. “Too close.” He licked my beard. I recoiled. “No.” Tail. “Absolutely not.” He tried again. I blocked him. “Boundaries.” Blaze stood. Stretched. Then shook. His collar jingled. The day had begun. Apparently.

I made coffee. Blaze ate breakfast. Then I ate. He watched. Still hopeful. Still unsuccessful. Progress. I reviewed yesterday’s photograph while the water heated. Blaze beside the creek. Silhouette. Light. I enlarged it. Sharp enough. Composition good. But what I liked wasn’t technical. It was the accident. I’d gone looking for a sunset. Instead I’d photographed a dog. I looked over. Blaze was sniffing the empty food bowl. “There’s a metaphor in there somewhere.” He pushed the bowl. It scraped across the ground. “Never mind.”

I packed camp. Blaze inspected the process again. When everything was ready, I shouldered the pack. Heavier than before. Dog food. Extra water. Dog supplies. The difference was impossible to ignore. I stood. Adjusted the straps. Then adjusted them again. Blaze waited. I looked

at him. This wasn't sustainable forever. Not on the routes I wanted to travel. Not safely. Not comfortably. Certainly not once I needed to carry several days of food and water for both of us. That didn't mean adopting Blaze had been a mistake. It meant the way I traveled needed to evolve. I looked down the trail. There would be towns ahead. People. Possibilities. I didn't know what the answer was yet. That was fine. Questions could travel too. I picked up the leash. "Ready?" Blaze's tail moved. We started walking.

The trail climbed gently away from camp. After perhaps twenty minutes, Blaze stopped. I expected another smell. Instead he looked back. At me. Then waited. I caught up. He started walking again. I smiled. Yesterday he'd charged ahead and expected me to follow. Today he'd noticed I wasn't beside him. Small thing. Maybe meaningless. Maybe not. We continued. At the top of the hill, the trees opened enough to reveal the valley beyond. Morning mist sat low between the ridges. Sunlight touched the upper slopes. I stopped. Blaze stopped too. This time he didn't pull. Didn't sniff. Didn't wander. He simply stood beside me. I took out the camera. No problem. No negotiation. Staff planted. Camera steady. Blaze waited. I framed the valley. Mist. Trees. Morning light. Click. Keeper. I lowered the camera. Blaze looked up. I scratched behind his ear. "You're learning." His tail moved. I thought about that. Then laughed. "Yeah." I put the camera away. "So am I." We walked on.

CHAPTER 12

The Arithmetic of Adventure

By nine in the morning, Blaze had learned three things. His name meant something. The word wait was negotiable. And apparently every person carrying food was a potential friend. I learned the third lesson when we passed a man eating a breakfast sandwich beside a trailhead. Blaze saw him. Stopped. The man saw Blaze. Blaze's tail started.

"No."

The man smiled.

"Friendly?"

"Extremely. Especially under current circumstances."

Blaze looked at the sandwich. The man looked at Blaze. I recognized the beginning of a conspiracy.

"Don't."

"I didn't do anything."

"I was talking to both of you."

The man laughed. Blaze sat. Perfectly. I looked down.

"You don't sit that nicely for me."

His eyes remained fixed on the sandwich.

"Ah. Motivation."

The man took another bite. Blaze watched it disappear with profound personal concern.

"Sorry, buddy."

Blaze looked at him. Then at me. Apparently I had failed to intervene.

"Come on."

He followed reluctantly. After twenty feet, he looked back. The sandwich was still there.

"Blaze."

He faced forward. Another ten feet. He looked back again.

"We have food."

Blaze sighed. The man behind us laughed. This was going well. We'd been together only a few days, and already my mornings had changed. Before Blaze, packing camp had been almost automatic. I knew where everything belonged. How much water I had. How much food remained. How far I could reasonably travel. Now there was an additional inventory.

Blaze's food. Blaze's water. Bowl. Leash. Waste bags. Treats. Medical records. Brush. And Blaze himself, who generally considered packing an interactive activity. I rolled my bedroll. Blaze sniffed it. I packed cookware. Blaze sniffed it. I picked up the food bag. Blaze became deeply involved.

"Back."

He stepped backward.

"Good."

I put the food away. He stepped forward.

"That's not how 'back' works."

He wagged. Training was going to take time. That was fine. I had plenty. The morning trail climbed through forest before joining a quiet road. Blaze walked well. Better than yesterday. He still wanted to investigate things, but the leash remained loose more often than not. I noticed when he began checking on me. Not constantly. Just occasionally.

He'd move ahead. Sniff. Walk. Then glance back. There. Good. Continue. I found myself doing the same thing. Blaze beside me. Blaze ahead. Blaze investigating fern. Good. Continue. Neither of us needed constant attention. We simply needed to know where the other one was. I liked that arrangement. Around midmorning, we reached a small roadside market. I needed supplies.

Not urgently. But one of my new rules was going to be: Do not wait until dog food becomes urgent. Blaze couldn't come inside. There was no safe place where I was comfortable leaving him unattended. So I stood outside. This was new. Before Blaze, a store was simple. Walk in. Buy things. Walk out. Now I had a dog.

I looked through the window. Then at Blaze. He looked through the window too.

"Suggestions?"

Tail. A woman came out carrying groceries. Blaze watched her. She smiled.

"Beautiful dog."

"Thank you."

"New?"

I looked at him.

"Is it that obvious?"

"Still has the shelter tag."

I looked. Right.

"Very new."

"Congratulations."

Blaze approached her cautiously. She offered the back of her hand. Sniff. Tail. Permission granted. She scratched his neck.

"Big boy."

"Very."

"What is he?"

"Dog."

She laughed.

"Fair."

"Best guess is Lab, maybe Giant Schnauzer, some kind of terrier and whatever else wandered past."

She scratched behind his ear. Blaze leaned. The woman shifted her feet.

"Careful. He expresses affection through load-bearing."

She laughed again. When she left, I returned to the problem. Store. Dog. I could simply skip it. There would be another. Probably. But that wasn't a solution. It was avoidance. I checked the sign. No dogs except service animals. Blaze was not a service animal. Being very good at locating unattended cheese did not qualify. I sat on a bench outside.

"Well."

Blaze sat beside me. This was the first small boundary he'd put on my life. Not a serious one. Not unfair. Just real. There would be buildings he couldn't enter. Trails he couldn't use. Places where animals weren't permitted. Weather that was fine for me but not for him. Distances I could walk but shouldn't ask him to.

Travel had always involved limitations. I'd just acquired a new set. I scratched his ear.

"You're lucky you're charming."

Blaze leaned.

"Structural affection."

A few minutes later, a man came out of the market and sat at the opposite end of the bench. He had coffee and a newspaper. Blaze noticed.

Not the newspaper. The coffee. Then apparently decided coffee wasn't food. Good. The man looked at my pack.

"Long way?"

"Hopefully."

"Where to?"

"Eventually?"

He smiled.

"That's an answer."

I asked if he knew the area. He did. Very well. He'd lived nearby most of his life. His name was Daniel. We talked. Not because I needed anything. At first. He told me about the logging roads in the hills. Which ones were still public. Which had washed out years ago. Which were now gated.

He pointed out a route on my map that would keep us off the main road.

"That one's prettier anyway."

"Reliable water?"

"Usually this time of year."

"Usually?"

"Creek runs year-round, but summers have been getting drier."

I marked it.

"Thank you."

He looked at Blaze.

"Taking him?"

"That's the current arrangement."

"Big dog."

"So I've discovered."

Daniel nodded toward my pack.

"You carrying his food?"

"Yes."

"All of it?"

"At the moment."

He laughed.

"You're going to hate that."

"I already dislike it."

Daniel folded his newspaper.

"Ever use one of those dog packs?"

"I've thought about it."

"Mine used to carry his own water."

"What kind of dog?"

"Malamute mix."

"How much?"

"Dog or pack?"

"Pack."

"Not much. People overdo it."

Good answer.

"That's what I was thinking."

"Fit matters. Conditioning matters more."

I nodded. Blaze lay at my feet. Daniel looked at him.

"He's young?"

"About three, best guess."

"Vet checked him?"

"Shelter did."

"If you're going to put miles on him, I'd have somebody look at joints and feet before you get ambitious."

That was sensible. Very sensible. I took out my notebook. Daniel smiled.

"You're writing that down?"

"I've learned that remembering things is considerably easier when I cheat."

He pointed toward town.

"Veterinarian about six miles from here."

I looked at the map.

"Which direction?"

"Unfortunately for whatever you're planning, east."

East was not where I'd intended to go. I looked at Blaze. He was asleep. Of course.

"Six miles?"

"Maybe seven."

I marked it. My route had just changed. Not dramatically. Still. Changed. I felt something unexpected. Nothing. No irritation. No sense that Blaze was interfering with the trip. Just new information. Vet east. So east. Interesting. Daniel finished his coffee. Before leaving, he asked, "Need

anything from inside?" I almost said no. Instinct. My supplies were my responsibility.

Then I looked through the window. Dog food. Probably.

"Actually..."

Daniel waited.

"If they have dog food, could you tell me what brands?"

He smiled.

"Sure."

He went inside. A few minutes later, he returned with three names and approximate bag sizes written on the edge of his newspaper. I thanked him.

"Want me to buy one?"

I considered.

"No, I've got enough to reach the vet and town beyond."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"All right."

No pressure. I liked that. He walked away. Blaze woke. Looked at Daniel. Then at me.

"You slept through useful information."

Blaze yawned. We headed east. My original route went south. For several minutes, I thought about that. Then stopped. Not walking. Thinking. There wasn't an original route. Not really. There was just the direction I'd planned before circumstances changed. Plans were useful. Plans were not commandments. Mercer had apparently understood that more than a century ago. Poor maps.

Local knowledge. Routes changing with water and terrain. I smiled.

"All right, Mercer."

Blaze looked up.

"Not you."

He sniffed a bush.

"Definitely not you."

The road east was quieter than expected. We walked the shoulder where necessary and used parallel trails whenever possible. By noon, clouds had moved in. Good walking weather. Blaze maintained his pace. We stopped more often than I normally would. Water. Rest. Paw check. Then continue. The paw checks annoyed him. I lifted one front paw. Looked. Fine.

Second. Fine. Back paw. Blaze turned his head.

“Yes, I’m aware this is undignified.”

He tried to pull it away.

“Hold on.”

Pads looked good. No cuts. No irritation. I released him. He immediately sniffed the paw as though verifying I hadn’t replaced it.

“Still yours.”

At lunch, I made an important discovery. Blaze did not understand why I got bread and he did not. He ate his meal. Then sat beside me. I ate bread. Blaze watched.

“No.”

I added cheese. His posture improved.

“No.”

I took a bite. His ears moved.

“Still no.”

He looked away. I continued eating. He looked back.

“Nothing has changed.”

He lay down. I ate. Then I noticed his eyes. Still watching. Only his head had turned away.

“You think you’re subtle.”

Tail thump. After lunch, I took out the camera. Not because I’d seen anything. Just checking it. Blaze immediately looked toward me. I noticed. Interesting. Camera out now meant something to him. Stopping. Waiting. Sometimes sitting. I pointed toward him.

“Stay.”

Blaze stared. I took one step backward. He stood.

“No.”

I returned.

“Sit.”

He sat.

“Stay.”

One step. Blaze remained. Two. He stood. I returned. Again. This time two steps. Stayed. Three. Stayed. I lifted the camera. Blaze walked toward me.

“Almost.”

We tried again. By the fifth attempt, I could step several feet away, lift the camera and take one photograph before Blaze decided the exercise was finished. I checked the image. Blaze sat beside my pack. Tongue out.

One ear folded. Not artistic. Not particularly well composed. But useful. A training photograph. I kept it. We reached the veterinary clinic late in the afternoon.

I hadn't called. That was optimistic. The receptionist informed me they were booked. That was realistic.

"Tomorrow?"

She checked.

"Ten forty."

I looked down at Blaze. He was sniffing a display of flea preventatives.

"Works for me."

"New patient?"

"Very."

Forms appeared. Of course. I filled them out.

Name: Blaze That still made me smile.

Breed:

I wrote: Mixed. Very. The receptionist read it. Looked at Blaze.

"Accurate."

There was a campground nearby. Convenient. More expensive than free. Less expensive than walking seven miles away and seven miles back. I paid. Blaze and I found our site. Tent. Bedding. Food secured. Water. Routine was already forming. That surprised me. Only a few days. Yet certain things had begun happening in the same order. Blaze inspected camp.

I set it up. He checked the food. I told him no. He ignored his own bedding. I moved it closer to mine. He accepted this as proof of successful negotiation. Routine. Maybe home wasn't always a place. Maybe sometimes it was a sequence. The campground had other people. Families. RVs. Tents. Dogs. That made the evening useful.

Blaze noticed every dog. Most he watched. Some he wanted to approach. One large shepherd barked from across the loop. Blaze stiffened. I redirected him. He came. Treat. Good. A small spaniel passed closer. Blaze sniffed. Tail loose. The owner asked if they could meet. I said no. Not yet. I didn't know Blaze well enough. The owner nodded.

No argument. I appreciated that. Blaze looked at me as the spaniel walked away.

"Someday."

He watched.

"Maybe."

Tail. At camp, I read the photography book while Blaze worked on the rubber ball I'd bought him. For several minutes, this went perfectly. Then the ball rolled beneath the picnic table. Blaze followed. His head fit. His shoulders did not. He pushed. The table moved. I looked over the book.

"Problem?"

Blaze pushed harder. The table moved again.

"That's not the solution."

He backed out. Walked around. Tried from the other side. The ball remained inaccessible. Blaze looked at me. I looked at him.

"You got it there."

He stared. I returned to the book. Blaze pawed beneath the table. Scrape. Scrape. Scrape. I turned a page. Scrape. Scrape. I sighed.

"Fine."

I retrieved the ball. Blaze wagged.

"You've learned nothing."

He took the ball. Two minutes later it rolled beneath the table again. I closed the book. Later, I reviewed the map. Vet tomorrow. Then south again. Probably. I had enough food. Water available. Weather mild. Everything worked. For now. But the weight remained. I couldn't ignore it. I pulled the food from my pack. Mine. Blaze's. I put everything together.

Then lifted it.

"Ridiculous."

Blaze watched. His food alone was a significant load. And this was only several days. Add a dry stretch requiring extra water and the numbers became worse. I could shorten every route. Stay close to towns. Resupply constantly. That was possible. But it would close off places I loved. Longer trails. Remote camps. Days away from roads. There had to be another solution.

I looked around the campground. RVs. Trailers. Cars. A camper van. The van caught my attention. Not because it was beautiful. It wasn't. Newer. White. Clean. Expensive-looking. But the side door was open. Inside I could see shelves. Storage. A small sleeping platform. Water containers. Food. Gear. I stared. Blaze came over. Sat beside me. I looked at him.

Then at the van.

"No."

Blaze's tail moved.

"I don't have van money."

Tail.

“Also, I like walking.”

Blaze looked toward the van.

“Stop it.”

He had done nothing. This was irritating. I returned to the map. The idea remained. Not necessarily a van. Something. A base. Storage. A place to keep food and water. A way to travel between regions without carrying everything on my back. Then walk from there. I didn’t need to stop being a traveler on foot. Maybe I needed somewhere to return to.

I wrote one word in my notebook. Vehicle?

Then underneath: Expensive.

Then: Very expensive. I closed the notebook. Problem solved. That night, rain started. Light. Steady. I sat beneath the shelter at our campsite with the pirate novel. Blaze lay beside me. The rubber ball was safely trapped beneath one paw. He had learned something. The rain tapped against the roof. People retreated into tents and RVs. Campground sounds softened.

Blaze raised his head whenever a door closed. Then settled. I read. The pirates had finally reached the island. Unfortunately, the map appeared to be wrong. I smiled.

“Mercer would’ve hated these people.”

Blaze looked at me.

“Long story.”

He put his head down. The rain strengthened. I stopped reading. Across the campground, water ran from the roof of the camper van. Warm light glowed through its windows. Someone inside moved around. Dry. Food stored. Gear stored. Probably a bed that didn’t need rolling every morning. I looked at my tent. Then at Blaze. Then at the van.

“No.”

Blaze sighed.

“Thank you.”

We slept. Sometime during the night, Blaze migrated from his bedding to mine again. This time I didn’t wake until morning. Progress. Or surrender. Hard to tell. The veterinary clinic smelled fascinating. According to Blaze. He investigated every chair leg in the waiting room. Then the door. Then a corner. Then my boots.

“Those haven’t changed.”

He sniffed them anyway. A cat carrier sat across the room. Blaze noticed. His entire body became attentive. The carrier made a small sound. Blaze’s ears went forward.

“No.”

He looked at me.

“Not your business.”

The carrier made another sound. Blaze leaned slightly.

“Blaze.”

He looked back. Treat. Good. The cat remained uninvestigated. For now. The veterinarian was a woman named Dr. Patel. She examined Blaze thoroughly. Heart. Lungs. Eyes. Ears. Teeth. Joints. Paws. Weight. One hundred and seventeen pounds. I looked at Blaze.

“You’ve gained two.”

Dr. Patel smiled.

“Or the shelter scale and ours disagree.”

“I prefer blaming him.”

Blaze panted. I explained how I traveled. Not vaguely. Miles. Terrain. Camping. Weather. Long days. Blaze’s possible future pack. Dr. Patel listened. Good. Then she asked questions. Also good. She didn’t tell me Blaze could or couldn’t become a trail dog based on one exam. Instead, she talked about conditioning. Gradually increasing mileage. Watching paw pads. Heat. Hydration.

Rest. Body condition. Joint health. Parasite prevention. Wildlife. Emergency planning. I wrote things down. A lot of things. Blaze tried to eat the corner of a pamphlet.

“Don’t.”

Dr. Patel laughed.

“Also that.”

I added: Don’t eat veterinary literature. When we discussed packs, she agreed with Daniel. Start light. Proper fit. Condition first. Don’t assume a large dog should carry a large load simply because he can. Good. That settled it. Blaze could eventually carry some of his supplies. But that wasn’t the whole solution. Not for long remote travel. I already knew that.

At the end of the appointment, Dr. Patel scratched Blaze’s chest. He leaned. She adjusted her stance automatically.

“He’s a leaner.”

“Violently affectionate.”

She laughed.

“He’s in good shape.”

I looked at him. That mattered more than I’d expected.

“Good.”

“Build him up gradually. Give him time.”

"I can do that."

Blaze looked at me. I scratched behind his ear.

"We're not in a hurry."

And I meant it. Outside, the rain had stopped. The world smelled clean. Blaze found this extremely exciting. We walked toward the campground. I had intended to head south immediately after the appointment. Instead, I decided we'd stay another night. No reason to rush. Tomorrow worked too. Maybe the day after. The trail wasn't going anywhere. We passed a bulletin board outside a hardware store.

Community notices. Firewood. Room for rent. Lost cat. Guitar lessons. Old fishing boat. Help wanted. I glanced. Kept walking. Then stopped. Backed up.

One card read: PROPERTY CLEANUP / HANDYMAN HELP NEEDED Below it was a phone number.

Another: LABOR TRADE POSSIBLE I stared. Blaze sniffed the bottom of the bulletin board.

"Don't."

He stopped. I looked again. Labor trade. Probably nothing. Maybe lodging. Maybe food. Maybe equipment. Maybe cash. I copied the number anyway. I had bartered work before. Repairs. Cleanup. Hauling. Odd jobs. Sometimes money wasn't the only useful payment. I looked toward the road. A pickup passed. Then a battered old van. Not a camper. Just a van.

I watched it disappear. The idea returned. Vehicle. Storage. Food. Water. Base. Way to reach farther trails. I shook my head.

"Still expensive."

Blaze looked up. Then started walking. I followed. That afternoon we took a short trail outside town. Nothing ambitious. Dr. Patel had said gradual. So gradual. Blaze explored. I photographed a mushroom growing from a moss-covered log. Reference first. Then I changed angles. Low. The mushroom wasn't remarkable. The light was. Soft after rain. Water droplets clung to the cap.

I waited until Blaze finished investigating something behind me.

Then: Click. Keeper. Maybe. I checked it. Yes. Keeper. Farther along, Blaze stopped. His nose lifted. He stared into the trees. I stopped too. Movement. Large. Brown. Deer. The animal stood perhaps forty yards away. Blaze stiffened. I shortened the leash.

"Easy."

The deer watched us. Blaze watched the deer. His body wanted forward. I could feel it through the leash.

"Blaze."

Nothing.

"Blaze."

One ear moved. Good.

"Here."

He looked at me. Treat. The deer moved. Blaze snapped his attention back. But he didn't lunge. The deer disappeared between the trees. Blaze watched. Then sniffed the trail where the scent crossed. I waited. Eventually he looked at me.

"That was good."

Tail. Treat. Then he followed the deer scent.

"No."

Apparently praise had limits. We returned to camp before evening. I called the number from the bulletin board. A man answered. I asked about the cleanup job. He had a property outside town. Old workshop. Overgrown lot. Storm debris. Some repairs. Several days of work. Maybe a week. Payment negotiable. I asked what "labor trade possible" meant. He said he had things.

Tools. Camping equipment. Building materials. A few old vehicles. I stopped.

"What kind of vehicles?"

Pause.

"Why?"

"Curious."

He listed them. Old pickup. Small utility trailer. Something that hadn't run in ten years.

Then:

"Old Volkswagen camper."

I didn't say anything. Blaze was chewing his ball. The man continued.

"Sixties, I think. Been sitting."

I looked at Blaze. Blaze looked at me.

"No."

The man said, "What?"

"Sorry. Dog."

"Ah."

I stood.

"What condition is the Volkswagen in?"

He laughed.

“Depends how optimistic you are.”

That was not encouraging.

“Does it run?”

“Not currently.”

“Engine?”

“Still there.”

“Rust?”

“It’s old.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s also the answer.”

Fair.

“Title?”

“Clean.”

That mattered.

“What would you want for it?”

Another laugh.

“More than a week’s cleanup.”

“I assumed.”

“But if you know how to work…”

I looked at my hands. Then at Blaze. Then at the ridiculous amount of dog food occupying part of my pack.

“Maybe.”

We arranged to meet the next morning. I ended the call. Blaze dropped the ball at my feet. I stared at him.

“This is your fault.”

Tail.

“I was perfectly functional.”

Tail.

“I had a system.”

He picked up the ball.

“I carried what I needed.”

He dropped it again.

“Now apparently I’m shopping for a van that doesn’t run.”

Blaze sat. I picked up the ball. Threw it. He chased it. This time he brought it back. All the way. Dropped it directly at my feet. I stared. Blaze panted happily.

“Now you learn fetch?”

Tail.

“Convenient.”

That evening I wrote in my notebook. Blaze: healthy. Build mileage gradually. Pack later, light.

Then: Work opportunity.

Then: VW camper. 1960s? Not running. I stared at those words.

Underneath, I wrote: Do not get attached. I looked across camp. Blaze was asleep. His ball beneath one paw.

I added: This applies to vehicles. Then closed the notebook. The next morning, we followed directions out of town. A narrow road. Then a gravel road. Then a driveway bordered by trees. Blaze walked beside me. The property appeared slowly. House. Workshop. Stacks of lumber. Old machinery. A pickup. Trailer. Pieces of equipment in various states of usefulness.

A man stood near the workshop. He waved. I waved back. Blaze’s tail moved. We approached.

“Bone?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Ray.”

We shook hands. He looked at Blaze.

“Big dog.”

“I’ve been told.”

Blaze sniffed Ray. Ray offered a hand. Blaze approved. Structural affection followed. Ray laughed and braced himself.

“Friendly too.”

“Violently.”

We talked about the work first. That mattered. Cleanup. Repairing part of a fence. Clearing storm debris. Helping reorganize the workshop. Some carpentry. Nothing impossible. Several days. Possibly longer. Then I asked.

“The Volkswagen?”

Ray smiled.

“Knew you’d ask.”

He led us behind the workshop. We rounded the corner. And there it was. It was ugly. That was my first thought. My second was that ugly was unfair. Neglected. That was better. Old Volkswagen camper bus. Faded paint. Surface rust. Dirty windows. One tire nearly flat. Pop-top stained from years outside. A patch of moss had established itself near one window.

I stopped. Blaze walked forward. Sniffed the tire.

"Don't."

He moved to another tire. Ray folded his arms.

"Told you."

I walked around it. Slowly. Not admiring. Evaluating. Rust. Some concerning. Some probably manageable. Glass intact. Mostly. Interior? Ray opened the side door. It protested. Loudly. Inside were old cabinets. A bench. Storage. Dust. Mouse evidence. A lot of mouse evidence. I leaned back.

"That's ambitious."

"Yep."

"Engine seized?"

"Don't think so."

"You don't know?"

"Haven't tried in years."

"Brakes?"

Ray laughed.

"Assume everything."

"Good philosophy."

Blaze jumped his front paws onto the doorway.

"No."

He looked at me.

"Not yet."

He sniffed inside. Tail moved. I looked at the interior again. Storage. Food. Water. Books. Camera equipment. Dog supplies. A bed. A place to leave equipment while we walked. Not replacing the trail. Supporting it. I could see it. That was dangerous.

"What do you want for it?" I asked.

Ray named a number. I laughed. He laughed too.

"Had to try."

"It's not running."

"I know."

"It's possibly an ecosystem."

"Also true."

"It has moss."

"That's extra."

I looked at him. He smiled. Good. We could work with this. We negotiated. Not quickly. Work. Money. Parts. More work. What Ray could provide. What I could repair. What would require someone else. The number moved. The labor increased. The number moved again. Eventually we reached something that wasn't an agreement. But it wasn't impossible either. I could work off a substantial portion.

If I could get the van roadworthy, the remaining amount might be manageable. Might. I looked at the Volkswagen. Blaze sat beside it. For once, still. I imagined a name painted somewhere on the body. Then immediately stopped myself.

"No."

Ray looked at me.

"Dog again?"

"This time me."

He nodded.

"Those are harder."

I walked around the van once more. No decision. Not today. That was important. I'd learned something from Blaze. Interest didn't require immediate commitment. Sometimes you looked. Sometimes you walked. Sometimes you came back tomorrow. I turned to Ray.

"I'll do the cleanup job."

"Van or cash?"

"Cash for now."

He smiled.

"Smart."

"I have occasional moments."

"And after?"

"We'll see."

Ray showed me where I could camp on the property while I worked. Water available. Bathroom access. Safe place for Blaze. That helped. A lot. I set up camp beneath the trees. Blaze inspected everything. Then tried to investigate the workshop.

"No."

He looked at me.

"Boundaries."

Tail. That evening, I sat beside the fire. Blaze beside me. Book open. Camera nearby. The old Volkswagen was visible through the trees. Barely. Faded. Forgotten. Waiting. I tried to read. The pirate captain

had finally reached the treasure. I read the same paragraph three times. Nothing. I looked toward the van.

"No."

Blaze lifted his head.

"Not you."

He put it down. I returned to the book. Another paragraph. Looked at the van. Storage. Water. Food. Books. Longer journeys. A base. I sighed. Blaze's tail thumped once without him lifting his head.

"Don't start."

Another thump. I closed the book. Tomorrow I would work. That was all. The van could sit there. I wasn't in a hurry. I wasn't even sure I wanted it. And if the last few days had taught me anything, it was that some decisions deserved time. I looked at Blaze. He was asleep. A few days ago, I'd said almost exactly the same thing about him.

I looked back toward the Volkswagen.

"That's not encouraging."

Blaze snored. And somewhere behind the workshop, the old camper waited quietly for morning.

CHAPTER 13

The Things That Stay

Ray believed in starting early. Blaze did too. I had not been consulted. I woke to a cold nose against my face.

“No.”

Blaze withdrew. For approximately three seconds. Then the nose returned.

“Still no.”

Tail against the tent. Thump. Thump. Thump. I opened one eye. Blaze stared at me.

“You’re aware the sun is barely participating.”

Tail. I reached for my hat. Blaze immediately turned toward the tent door. Apparently this counted as victory. It probably did. The morning was cool enough that my breath would have shown if I’d had any. Ray’s property looked different in the early light. Less cluttered. That was probably because half the clutter was still in shadow.

The workshop sat beneath tall trees, patched roof dark from yesterday’s rain. Stacks of old lumber leaned beneath a corrugated metal shelter. A narrow lane disappeared behind the building toward whatever collection of machinery Ray had accumulated farther back. And through the trees, the Volkswagen waited. I did not look at it. This was deliberate. I was here to work.

Blaze looked at it.

“Don’t encourage me.”

Blaze sniffed a fern. Good. Ray appeared from the house carrying two mugs. He handed me one.

“Coffee.”

“You’re an excellent employer.”

“Wait until you see the wages.”

I drank. Strong. Hot. Not complicated. Exactly right. Ray looked toward my tent.

“Sleep all right?”

“Mostly.”

Blaze leaned against his leg. Ray shifted his stance.

“Except for that.”

“He’s developed a morning notification system.”

Blaze looked up at us.

“Does it have a snooze button?”

“I haven’t found it.”

Ray scratched Blaze’s neck. Blaze leaned harder.

“Careful.”

“I’ve got him.”

“You say that now.”

Ray laughed. The first job was storm debris. A windstorm a few weeks earlier had dropped several large limbs near the back fence and scattered smaller branches across the property. Ray had cleared enough to use the driveway. Everything else had become tomorrow’s problem. Tomorrow had apparently arrived.

“You have a chainsaw?” I asked.

“Three.”

“Do any work?”

“Two.”

“Which two?”

Ray thought.

“Depends on the day.”

I looked at him.

“Excellent.”

We started with what didn’t require machinery. Branches. Brush. Rotten pieces of lumber. Metal scraps that had no business being where they were. Ray had separate piles for almost everything. Wood that could still be used. Wood for burning. Metal worth keeping. Metal worth selling. Parts belonging to machines that no longer existed. Parts belonging to machines Ray still owned but could not immediately identify.

I held up a rusted bracket.

“Keep?”

Ray looked at it. Long pause.

“Probably.”

“What’s it from?”

"No idea."

I put it in the keep pile.

"I understand the system now."

"You don't throw away something you'll need next week."

"How often do you need something the week after throwing it away?"

"Every time."

Fair. Blaze considered cleanup a collaborative effort. Unfortunately, we disagreed about objectives. I carried a branch toward the burn pile. Blaze took the other end.

"No."

He pulled. I stopped.

"Blaze."

Tail.

"This is employment."

Pull.

"You're interfering with commerce."

Pull. I released the branch. Blaze backed away triumphantly. Ray watched from beside the fence.

"Good helper."

"He's management."

Blaze shook the branch.

"Very hands-on."

Eventually I traded him the branch for his rubber ball. This worked until the ball disappeared beneath a stack of old pallets. Blaze stared at the gap. Then at me.

"No."

He stared harder.

"You know what happened last time."

Tail.

"I'm working."

He put one paw beneath the pallet. Scrape.

"Blaze."

Scrape. I ignored him. Scrape. Scrape. Ray walked past.

"Something under there?"

"His dignity."

Ray bent down and retrieved the ball. Blaze accepted it gratefully. I looked at Ray.

“You’ve undermined me.”

“Employee morale.”

By midmorning we had opened a path to the back fence. A cedar had lost a large limb, which had landed across two sections. The fence itself was old. Posts leaned. Wire sagged. One rail had broken completely. Ray looked at it.

“Could replace the whole run.”

“You could.”

He looked at me.

“We aren’t.”

“I knew that.”

We removed the limb first. One of the chainsaws worked. The second did not. The third started for six seconds, made a noise suggesting personal grievance, then stopped. Ray stared at it.

“Worked last year.”

“That’s comforting.”

“I’ll look at it later.”

I suspected many objects on the property had reached their current location following that sentence. Once the fallen wood was cleared, we assessed the fence. I could replace the broken rail and reset one post. The rest would last. Probably. Ray had lumber stacked beneath the shed. Some warped. Some split. Some excellent. I selected a piece. Ray watched.

“That one’s oak.”

“I noticed.”

“I’ve had that fifteen years.”

“Then congratulations. Today it becomes a fence.”

He frowned.

“Could use pine.”

“Do you have straight pine?”

Ray looked toward the lumber pile. We both knew the answer. Oak became a fence. Bone travel had taught me several useful things. How to repair gear. How to patch fabric. How to improvise. How to make something functional when the ideal tool was somewhere I wasn’t. It had not made me a carpenter. Fortunately, fences don’t usually demand cabinetry.

Measure. Cut. Fit. Adjust. Discover the post isn’t square. Adjust again. Discover nothing on Ray’s property had been square since approximately 1987. Adjust again. Eventually the rail fit. Ray pushed on it.

“Solid.”

“That’s the goal.”

“You do much construction?”

“Enough to know when I shouldn’t.”

He nodded.

“Also useful.”

We stopped for lunch beneath the trees. Ray had sandwiches. I had bread, cheese and the remains of the blackberry jam I’d bought several days earlier. Blaze had his food. Blaze finished first. Of course. Then he sat between Ray and me. Ray looked at him. Blaze looked at Ray’s sandwich.

“No,” I said.

Ray took a bite. Blaze followed the sandwich with his eyes.

“He already ate?”

“Yes.”

“All of it?”

“Ask him and you’ll get a different answer.”

Blaze looked at me. I pointed toward his bowl.

“Evidence.”

He sighed. Ray laughed.

“He’s convincing.”

“That’s why I’m here.”

Ray looked at me. I looked at the dog.

“The shelter.”

“Ah.”

For a while we ate without talking. I liked people who could do that. Silence wasn’t always something that needed fixing. Wind moved through the upper branches. Somewhere behind the workshop, metal clicked as it warmed in the sun. A truck passed on the road and faded away. Blaze lay between us. Then his head came up. Not toward the road.

Toward the edge of the property. His ears moved forward. I followed his gaze. Nothing. Then something moved beneath an old trailer. Small. Low. Gone. Blaze stood.

“Easy.”

He took one step. I touched his collar.

“Leave it.”

His body tightened with curiosity. Not aggression. Interest. Whatever had moved beneath the trailer moved again. Two eyes appeared briefly in the shadow. A cat. Gray-brown. Striped. Watching. Blaze stared. The cat stared back. Neither seemed impressed.

"Blaze."

His ear turned toward me.

"Here."

He looked. Treat. Good. When I looked back, the cat was gone. Ray had watched the entire exchange.

"That cat yours?" I asked.

"Nope."

"Neighbor's?"

"Maybe."

That was not useful. Ray took another bite.

"Helpful."

"There are cats around."

"I had gathered that."

"Barns down the road. Couple houses. They move around."

"Anybody feeding them?"

"Probably everybody and nobody."

I looked toward the trailer. Nothing. Blaze did too.

"Leave it."

He sighed. Apparently the world contained an unreasonable number of things he was not allowed to investigate. After lunch we worked on the fence again. The cat did not return. Or I didn't see it. Those were different things. Blaze checked beneath the trailer twice. I redirected him both times. By the third, he sniffed from several feet away and continued.

Progress. Small. Still progress. Late afternoon brought us into the workshop. Calling it a workshop was technically accurate. There was a workbench. There were tools. There was also enough accumulated material to suggest several other buildings had slowly migrated inside. Ray stood in the doorway.

"This is the bad part."

I looked around.

"There's a worse part?"

"Back room."

"Of course."

The workbench itself was nearly invisible beneath tools, hardware, electrical parts, containers of screws, coils of wire, old manuals and one toaster. I picked up the toaster.

"Automotive?"

Ray took it from me.

"Kitchen."

"Excellent."

"Stopped working."

"Why is it here?"

"I was going to fix it."

"When?"

He looked at the toaster.

"Recently."

I waited.

"2014."

I nodded.

"Very recently."

We spent two hours organizing. Not cleaning. That would imply disposal. Ray's definition of organizing involved moving objects into more specific categories of continued existence. Electrical. Plumbing. Fasteners. Automotive. Woodworking. Unknown but probably important. That last category grew rapidly. I held up a small metal object. Ray squinted.

"Keep."

"Naturally."

Near the back wall were shelves of old books and manuals. Those slowed me down. Ray noticed.

"Found your weakness."

"Books aren't a weakness."

"You stopped working."

"Temporary research."

There were repair manuals. Electrical guides. Old catalogs. Maps. A gardening book from the 1970s. Two volumes about regional history. And a thick Volkswagen service manual. I did not touch that one. Again, deliberately. I pulled out one of the local history books instead.

Its cover showed a black-and-white photograph of a street lined with wooden storefronts.

"Town used to look like that?"

Ray leaned against the bench.

"Some of it."

I studied the picture. The road was unpaved. Horse-drawn wagon near one side. A few people standing outside a general store.

"Where was this?"

"Main road. Couple miles from here."

I looked again.

"None of these buildings are there now."

"One is."

"Which?"

"Hardware store."

I thought about the bulletin board.

"That hardware store?"

"Not the same building exactly. Front got changed. Back section's old."

Interesting.

"How old?"

Ray shrugged.

"Old enough."

The historian in me found this offensive.

"That's not a date."

"Nope."

I opened the book. Ray returned to sorting. I read a page. Then another. The town had grown around timber, agriculture and the routes connecting smaller communities to larger markets. Roads improved slowly. Businesses moved. Fires destroyed some early buildings. Others were rebuilt. Nothing unusual. That was part of what interested me. History wasn't always battles and famous people.

Sometimes it was a bridge being built. A mill closing. A road changing direction. A store surviving three generations because people kept needing nails. I looked through the photographs. Families. Workers. Road crews. Logging equipment. A school. A flood. The river had changed course slightly after one particularly bad season. That caught me. Routes again. Water deciding. People adjusting.

Mercer would have liked that. Or photographed it. Possibly both. I closed the book. Work first. History later. The Volkswagen manual remained where it was. I noticed this despite not looking at it. By evening, the workshop looked better. Not clean. Better. A person could reach the workbench without stepping over anything. This seemed revolutionary. Ray stood in the doorway.

“Haven’t seen that floor in years.”

“Which part?”

He pointed. I looked. Concrete.

“Congratulations.”

“Thought it was dirt.”

I washed up at the outdoor faucet. Blaze drank from his bowl nearby. Then froze. His eyes went past me. I turned. The cat sat on the fence. Same one. At least I thought so. Gray-brown tabby. Lighter chest. Large eyes. Tail curled around the rail. Watching. Not frightened. Not approaching. Just observing. Blaze noticed. I shortened the leash.

“Leave it.”

His weight shifted forward. The cat did not move.

“Blaze.”

He looked at me. Treat. Then immediately looked back. Fair enough. Ray came out.

“Saw that one earlier?”

“Yes.”

He studied the cat.

“Seen her around before.”

“Her?”

“Pretty sure.”

“Know where she belongs?”

Ray shook his head.

“Could ask.”

That was exactly what I wanted.

“Please.”

He looked at me.

“I’m not adopting another animal.”

“I didn’t say you were.”

“I’ve had Blaze less than a week.”

Ray smiled.

“Didn’t say anything.”

“Your face did.”

The cat blinked. Then jumped down the other side of the fence and disappeared. Blaze pulled once.

“Leave it.”

He stopped. I scratched behind his ear.

"Good."

Ray made dinner. Stew. Nothing complicated. We ate outside. Blaze remained convinced there had been a clerical error regarding portions. There had not. Ray told me about the town. Not formally. Stories. That was better. The gas station that used to have a diner attached. The family who'd owned the hardware store for decades before selling it. A bridge that had been replaced after a flood.

A woman who ran the local post office long enough to know everyone and apparently everything. A sawmill that once employed half the people in the area.

"Half?"

Ray shrugged.

"Felt like half."

I smiled. There was memory. Then there were statistics. Both told stories. Just not always the same one.

"How long have you lived here?" I asked.

Ray looked across the property.

"Thirty-eight years."

"Same house?"

"Yep."

"That's impressive."

"Or unimaginative."

"Depends whether you wanted to leave."

He thought about that.

"Left plenty."

"Travel?"

"Some."

The answer was short. Not closed. Just small. I waited. Ray ate. Then nodded toward the trees.

"Used to travel in that."

I followed his gaze. The Volkswagen. There it was. I said nothing. Ray continued after a while.

"Not everywhere. People make those old buses sound more romantic than they were."

"Uncomfortable?"

"Slow."

"That's not always bad."

"No. But it's bad uphill with traffic behind you."

I smiled.

"Fair."

"No air conditioning. Heat barely worked. Wind pushed it around. Every truck passing felt like weather."

"Still sounds charming."

"It wasn't."

Pause.

"Mostly."

There it was.

"Yours originally?"

"No."

Ray looked at his bowl.

"My wife's."

I didn't move. He wasn't looking at me.

"Before we were married."

I waited.

"She bought it with her sister."

He smiled slightly.

"Both of them thought they were going to see the whole country."

"Did they?"

"Made it to California."

"That's part of the country."

Ray laughed.

"Then the fuel pump went out."

"Adventure."

"Then the starter."

"More adventure."

"Then they ran out of money."

"The complete experience."

Ray nodded.

"Pretty much."

He told me her name was Ellen. Not all at once. Pieces. She and her younger sister, June, bought the Volkswagen when they were barely out of school. It had already been used. Already faded. Already unreliable. They painted curtains for it. Built storage badly. Took roads they shouldn't have. Slept beside beaches when that was easier than finding somewhere legitimate.

Cooked things on a little stove that Ray claimed should have killed them.

"It didn't?"

"Not immediately."

Ray met Ellen later. The Volkswagen came with her.

"Package deal?"

"Pretty much."

"You liked the van?"

"No."

I waited. Ray smiled.

"Eventually."

They used it for camping. Short trips. Fishing. A few longer vacations. It carried furniture once. A broken washing machine twice. A dog named Roscoe who apparently considered the passenger seat his rightful property. Blaze lifted his head at the word dog.

"Different dog," I told him.

He put his head back down.

"What happened to Ellen?" I asked quietly.

Ray looked toward the workshop.

"Cancer."

Nothing else. He didn't need to provide a date. Or details. I nodded.

"I'm sorry."

"Long time ago."

That didn't mean it wasn't important. I knew better than to say so. Ray continued on his own.

"June moved east years before that. Van stayed here."

I looked through the trees. The Volkswagen seemed different now. Not better. Not worse. Just occupied by something besides rust. Memory had weight too.

"Did you keep using it?"

"For a while."

"Then?"

"Stopped."

He took another bite.

"One thing went bad. Then another. Had other vehicles. Kids were busy. Work."

He shrugged.

"You know how things sit."

I looked around his property.

"I have begun to understand."

Ray laughed.

"You ever think about fixing it?"

"Every year."

"Every year?"

"Yep."

"And?"

"Every year I don't."

I nodded. That made sense too. Sometimes fixing something meant admitting you were ready for it to become something different. Leaving it alone could preserve the last version. Even if preservation looked suspiciously like moss.

"That's why you haven't sold it."

Ray looked at me. Not surprised.

"No."

A few seconds passed.

"People have asked."

"I imagine."

"Collectors. Couple people wanting one for restoration. Somebody wanted to turn it into a coffee stand."

I looked at him.

"What did the van do to deserve that?"

Ray laughed.

"Didn't sell."

"Why?"

He looked toward it again.

"Didn't like any of them."

That was an answer. I didn't ask whether he liked me. That would have been ridiculous. Also premature. Instead I said, "For what it's worth, I'm still not buying it." Ray looked at me.

"Right."

"I'm serious."

"Sure."

"I've done one day of work."

"Yep."

“I haven’t even decided whether the thing can be repaired reasonably.”

“Correct.”

Blaze lifted his head. Ray looked at him. Then at me.

“Definitely not buying it.”

“Exactly.”

Blaze’s tail thumped.

“Traitor.”

After dinner, Ray went inside. I returned to camp. Blaze circled twice and collapsed near the fire. I took out the pirate novel. Read three pages. The pirates were arguing about navigation. Appropriate. I put the book down. The Volkswagen was barely visible between the trees. I didn’t look at it for long. Ellen. June. Roscoe. California. Fuel pump.

Starter. Trips. Fishing. A washing machine. None of those things had anything to do with me. That mattered. It wasn’t an unused object waiting for the correct owner. It had already belonged to people. Already carried a life. Maybe several. I opened the book again. Something moved near the edge of camp. Blaze’s head came up. Mine followed.

Two eyes reflected firelight. The cat. She sat beyond the circle of light. Maybe twenty feet away. Still. Watching. Blaze stood.

“Leave it.”

He didn’t move forward. Good. The cat watched him. Blaze watched the cat. I watched both.

“Nobody do anything stupid.”

Neither acknowledged me. Promising. The cat approached three steps. Stopped. Blaze’s tail moved. Slowly.

“Easy.”

The cat sat. Blaze sat. Interesting. I didn’t call her. Didn’t offer food. Didn’t reach. She wasn’t mine. May have belonged to someone. May have been perfectly capable of finding dinner somewhere else. She stayed for several minutes. Then turned and disappeared into the darkness. Blaze looked at me.

“What?”

He looked where she’d gone.

“Not everything you see needs to come home with us.”

Blaze stared. I realized the weakness of my argument.

“Fine. Historically, I lack credibility.”

He lay down. I returned to the book. A few minutes later I heard something behind me. Soft. I turned. Nothing. Then movement beside my

pack. The cat. Inside camp. I stayed still. Blaze saw her. His whole body became alert.

"Leave it."

He did. Barely. The cat sniffed the edge of my pack. Then my boot. Then looked directly at me. Large eyes. Gray-brown tabby markings across the face. Lighter fur beneath the chin. One ear turned toward Blaze. Blaze leaned forward. I touched his chest.

"Easy."

The cat took one step toward him. Blaze stopped breathing. Or seemed to. She sniffed. His nose moved. They touched noses for less than a second. The cat recoiled. Blaze recoiled. Both looked offended. I covered my mouth.

"Excellent diplomacy."

The cat moved away. Not running. Just creating distance. Blaze watched. I waited. She jumped onto the empty end of the picnic table. Sat. And began washing one paw. Apparently we no longer mattered. Blaze looked at me.

"I have no explanation."

She stayed nearly half an hour. Then vanished. No ceremony. No goodbye. One moment there. Next moment gone. Blaze searched briefly around the edge of camp until I called him back. Then he settled. I wrote in my notebook. Work: fence repaired. Workshop partially organized. Ray: lived here 38 years.

Then: VW belonged to Ellen. Bought with sister June. Traveled before marriage. California trip. Camping/fishing. Dog Roscoe. I stopped. That felt personal. I drew a line through part of it. Not erased. Just a reminder. Some stories were mine to remember. Not necessarily mine to record.

Below that I wrote: Cat. Female? Gray/brown tabby. Probably local. Ask ownership.

Then: Blaze behaved reasonably. I looked at him. He was asleep.

"Generous assessment."

The next morning, the cat was sitting on the hood of the Volkswagen. Of course she was. I stood outside the tent holding coffee. Blaze stood beside me. We stared. She stared back.

"That seems intentional."

Blaze's tail moved. The cat stretched. Slowly. Then sat again. Ray emerged from the workshop carrying a toolbox. He followed my gaze.

"There she is."

"Apparently."

"Asked about her."

That got my attention.

"And?"

"Neighbors know her."

"Owner?"

"Not really."

I looked at him. Ray set the toolbox down.

"She was born in a barn two properties over. Woman there feeds the cats, gets them fixed when she can. Some stay. Some wander."

"This one?"

"Wanders."

"Does she have a name?"

Ray shook his head.

"Not that anybody uses."

The cat began licking her shoulder.

"Healthy?"

"Seems to be. I'll ask more."

"Thank you."

Ray looked at me.

"I'm not adopting a cat."

"I didn't say anything."

"Again, your face."

Ray smiled. The cat jumped from the hood. Walked directly past us. Stopped beside Blaze. Blaze looked at me.

"You're asking permission?"

Tail.

"That's new."

I loosened the leash but kept control.

"Easy."

Blaze lowered his head. The cat sniffed him. Then rubbed her cheek against his front leg. Blaze froze. Completely. I had never seen one hundred and seventeen pounds of dog look so concerned about moving incorrectly. The cat walked beneath his chin. Blaze slowly turned his head. She flicked her tail across his nose. Blaze sneezed. The cat jumped away.

Ray laughed. Blaze looked wounded.

"Your first lesson in cats," I said.

We went back to work. The cat stayed. Not with us. Around us. Sometimes visible. Sometimes not. She sat on the fence while I replaced another board. Watched Ray work on a mower. Disappeared beneath the shed. Reappeared on a stack of lumber. Blaze eventually stopped reacting every time. Not completely. But enough. Once, while I was carrying scrap wood, I noticed them ten feet apart.

Blaze lying in shade. Cat sitting beside a stump. Neither looking at the other. That seemed significant. So naturally I reached for the camera. The cat immediately left. I lowered it.

"Fair."

Around noon, Ray handed me a wrench.

"Come on."

"Where?"

"Let's see whether you're buying a Volkswagen."

"I'm not."

"Right."

He walked toward the van. I followed. Blaze followed me. The cat followed Blaze. I stopped. Looked back. She stopped too.

"This is becoming a parade."

Ray kept walking. We opened the engine compartment. Dust. Leaves. Webs. Evidence that time had been conducting experiments. Ray stood beside me.

"Last ran…"

He thought.

"Nine years ago. Maybe ten."

"That's encouraging."

"It moved."

"Under its own power?"

"Mostly."

I looked at him.

"Define mostly."

"Had to push it once."

"Excellent."

I didn't pretend to know more than I did. Engines weren't magic. But neither were they forgiving. I knew enough basics to inspect obvious problems. Fluids. Belts. Hoses. Corrosion. Wiring. Fuel system. Whether anything appeared seized. Enough to know when I needed someone who knew more. Definitely enough to know we were not turning a key today. Ray agreed.

“First rule,” he said, “don’t make it worse.”

“That’s a strong rule.”

“I learned it repeatedly.”

We spent almost an hour just looking. The engine wasn’t obviously catastrophic. That meant very little. Rubber components had aged. Fuel lines would need attention. Battery was dead enough to qualify as geology. Electrical connections were corroded. Tires were finished. Brakes would need inspection before the van moved anywhere under power. Probably everything else too. I made a list.

Then another. Then looked at the lists.

“That’s a lot.”

Ray nodded.

“Yep.”

“Could still be more.”

“Definitely.”

“You’re a terrible salesman.”

“Not selling.”

I looked at him. He looked at the van. There it was again. Not selling. Not yet. Maybe not ever. I understood better now. Blaze sniffed the rear bumper. The cat jumped onto the roof. I looked up.

“How?”

She looked down. No explanation. Naturally. Ray leaned against the side of the bus.

“Ellen would’ve liked that.”

“The cat?”

“Yep.”

“She like cats?”

“Anything that ignored her.”

I smiled.

“That does seem to be their strongest quality.”

He pointed toward one of the rear windows.

“She made those curtains.”

I looked. I had assumed they were simply old fabric. Faded now. Pattern nearly gone. Uneven stitching. Handmade.

“They’re terrible.”

Ray laughed.

“Absolutely.”

“They staying?”

He didn’t answer immediately.

Then:

“If the van stays, they stay.”

I nodded. That told me something. We closed the engine compartment. I didn’t ask about price. Ray didn’t mention it. We returned to work. That felt right. The afternoon became hot. Blaze moved to shade. The cat vanished somewhere cooler. Ray and I cleared the back room of the workshop.

We found: Three lanterns. Six fishing rods. A box labeled TAXES 1998 that contained no taxes. Two old license plates. A cracked canoe paddle. A cassette player. A framed photograph. Ray stopped when he saw that. I didn’t touch it. He picked it up. Dust coated the glass. He wiped it with his sleeve. Two young women stood beside the Volkswagen.

Much younger van too. One woman had dark hair tied back. The other stood on the bumper with both arms raised. Mountains behind them. Ray smiled.

“Ellen and June.”

I leaned closer.

“California?”

“No. Oregon.”

“Van still running?”

“At that moment.”

I laughed. He held the photograph for a while. Then set it on the workbench. Not back in the box. That seemed important. I didn’t say so. Later, while moving another stack, I found a road atlas. Old. Edges worn. Several pages marked in pen. I opened it. Routes. Notes. Campgrounds. Fuel stops. One line across several states.

“Ray.”

He looked.

“That theirs?”

He came over. Took the atlas. His expression changed.

“Haven’t seen this in years.”

He flipped through.

“Yeah.”

He showed me a page.

“That’s the California trip.”

Ink followed highways south. A circle. Another.

A note: CHEAP GAS

Another: NEVER AGAIN I pointed.

“What happened there?”

Ray looked.

“Don’t remember.”

“Must’ve been good.”

“Or very bad.”

He closed the atlas carefully.

“Keep?” I asked.

Ray gave me a look.

“That was a stupid question.”

“Correct.”

We put it beside the photograph. Not in storage. Beside it. By late afternoon, the back room had changed. Not dramatically. But enough. Ray could reach shelves he hadn’t reached in years. The old photograph remained on the workbench. So did the atlas. I noticed Ray look at them several times. Sometimes stopping was its own kind of traveling.

Not because nothing moved. Because things had time to catch up. I walked into town before dinner. Blaze came with me. It wasn’t far. The day had cooled. We needed a few supplies, and Blaze needed the practice. The road passed several homes, fields and older buildings mixed with newer ones. I found myself noticing what Ray had described.

The hardware store. Not just the front. I walked around the side. The rear section looked older. Different siding. Different foundation. Maybe Ray was right. Probably. I made a note to ask. Not photograph yet. Research first. At the market, I still couldn’t take Blaze inside. Same problem. Different day.

This time Ray’s property was close enough that I could have left him there. I hadn’t. Learning involved repetition. So did poor planning. I stood outside. Blaze sat beside me.

“Eventually we’ll develop a system.”

Tail. A teenager came out carrying a bag.

“Nice dog.”

“Thank you.”

Blaze leaned toward him.

“Careful.”

The teenager laughed.

“Big.”

“Structurally.”

I bought supplies at an outdoor window attached to the small deli beside the market. Not everything I needed. Enough. Blaze received nothing. This created tension. On the walk back, we passed the hardware store again. An older man was closing up. I asked about the building. He looked pleased that somebody cared. The rear section, he said, had indeed been part of an older structure.

He gave me a date. I wrote it down. Then he gave me a second date. Then corrected himself. Then said I should ask Martha at the library because she knew for certain. Perfect. History.

“Library?” I asked.

“Two streets over.”

“Open tomorrow?”

“Morning.”

Good. I wrote that down too. Blaze sniffed a planter. The man looked at him.

“That’s Ray’s dog?”

“No.”

“Thought I saw him out there.”

“He’s mine.”

“You’re working for Ray?”

“For now.”

The man nodded.

“Good luck.”

“With the work?”

“Ray.”

I smiled.

“He’s been fine.”

“Give it time.”

We returned near sunset. The cat was waiting at my campsite. Not Ray’s. Mine. She sat directly in front of the tent. Blaze saw her. Stopped. Looked at me. I looked at him.

“Good.”

We approached slowly. The cat stood. I expected her to leave. Instead she walked toward us. Blaze sniffed. She sniffed. No sneezing. Progress. I set down the supplies. The cat investigated the bag.

“No.”

She looked at me. I had the strange sensation of being judged.

"You've met Blaze."

She blinked. Blaze wagged. I pointed to myself.

"I'm Bone."

Nothing. Reasonable. I wasn't naming her. Not yet. She might already have a name somewhere. Even if nobody used it. Names deserved more consideration than convenience. I'd learned that too. The cat jumped onto the picnic table. I unpacked. Blaze lay beneath it. After several minutes, the cat climbed down. Walked beneath the table. Stopped beside Blaze. Turned twice.

And lay down. Not touching him. Close. Blaze lifted his head. Looked at her. Then at me.

"Don't ruin this."

He slowly lowered his head. The cat closed her eyes. I took the camera. Slowly. Very slowly. Neither moved. I framed them. Blaze's enormous dark body in shadow beneath the table. The much smaller striped cat beside him. Evening light beyond them. Not friends. Not yet. Just two animals deciding that proximity was acceptable. Click. Both looked at me.

"Sorry."

The cat stood and walked away. Blaze remained. I checked the photograph. Keeper. Maybe. Ray came out carrying the framed photograph of Ellen and June. He had cleaned the glass.

"Found a place for it?"

"House."

He looked at my camera.

"Get anything?"

"Possibly."

I showed him the photo of Blaze and the cat. Ray smiled.

"She's getting comfortable."

"She is."

"Neighbor says she's been wandering this direction for months."

"Before I arrived?"

"Yep."

Good. That mattered. She wasn't here because of me. Not entirely. Maybe not at all.

"Any medical care?"

"Spayed. Vaccinated last year, apparently."

"Owner?"

"Nobody claiming her."

I nodded. Ray looked at me.

"Still not adopting a cat?"

"I'm not adopting anybody."

The cat appeared from beneath the trailer. Walked directly toward us. Ray smiled.

"Of course."

She stopped at my boot. Rubbed against it. Then walked away. I looked at Ray.

"That proves nothing."

"Absolutely."

We ate outside again. The cat stayed near camp. No food from me. Not until I knew what she was accustomed to eating and whether feeding her would interfere with whoever currently cared for her. Blaze watched her. She watched Blaze. Ray watched me.

"Stop."

"I didn't say anything."

After dinner, Ray went inside. I opened the pirate novel. The cat jumped onto the bench beside me. I looked at her. She sat. I read. She moved closer. I continued. Eventually she curled against my thigh. I stopped reading. Looked down. She looked up.

"You're very forward."

She closed her eyes. Blaze lay on the other side of the fire. Watching.

"Don't get jealous."

His tail thumped once. I scratched behind the cat's ear. She leaned into it. There it was. Permission. Then she rolled partially onto her side. I scratched her chest. She stretched. One paw touched my leg. I smiled.

"Dangerous."

She began purring. Blaze's ears moved. He stood. Came closer.

"Easy."

He approached the bench. The cat opened one eye. Blaze sniffed. She did not move. He lay down at my feet. The cat resumed purring. I looked around. Fire. Book. Dog. Cat. Old workshop. Old van hidden among trees. This was becoming suspiciously domestic.

"I would like the record to show that I am a traveler."

Nobody objected. That made it worse. Later, the cat left. Simply stood. Stretched. Walked into the dark. I watched her disappear. No leash. No promise. No obligation to return. That was somehow appropriate. Blaze watched too. Then looked at me.

"She's not ours."

Tail.

"Stop voting."

I wrote before bed. Hardware store rear structure may be older. Ask library/Martha.

Then: Ray brought Ellen/June photo into house. I thought about that. Maybe clearing the workshop had done more than create floor space. Sometimes objects waited because people did. I looked through the trees toward the Volkswagen. For the first time, I wondered whether Ray had kept it because selling it would feel like losing Ellen again. That wasn't a question I would ask.

Not directly. If he wanted to tell me, he would. Morning arrived without Blaze's nose. I woke on my own. Suspicious. I sat up. Blaze was already awake. Staring toward the tent entrance. I unzipped it. The cat sat outside. Blaze looked at me. I looked at the cat. She walked inside. Without permission. Circled once on Blaze's bedding.

And sat. Blaze stared.

"Apparently you've been evicted."

He looked at me. The cat began washing her paw. I laughed.

"All right."

I reached for my hat.

"Let's see what today does."

The library opened at nine. We had work before then. Ray wanted to finish clearing the rear fence. I wanted to see whether the second chainsaw had forgiven him. It had not. The cat followed us partway across the property. Then climbed onto the Volkswagen. Again. She sat above the windshield. Watching. Blaze looked back at her twice.

By the third time he didn't. Interesting. Ray handed me gloves.

"Ready?"

"Always."

"That's a lie."

"Usually."

We headed toward the fence. Behind us, sunlight reached the old Volkswagen. For a few minutes, the faded paint almost looked warm. Not restored. Not new. Not waiting for me. Just there. Holding stories that weren't mine. Maybe someday it would carry new ones. Maybe not. I picked up the first branch. Blaze grabbed the other end. I stared at him.

"Seriously?"

Tail. Ray laughed. And somewhere behind us, the cat watched from the roof of the old van as the workday began.

CHAPTER 14

A Name That Keeps Coming Back

The cat had developed a schedule. I had not approved it. This did not appear to concern her. She arrived shortly before breakfast. Disappeared while we worked. Returned around lunch. Vanished again. Then generally appeared near camp sometime before dinner as though checking whether we had managed the day without supervision. On the fourth morning, I opened the tent and found her sitting directly outside. Blaze was still asleep. I looked at her. She looked at me. “You’re early.” Nothing. I stepped over her. She followed. “That wasn’t an invitation.” She continued following. I started coffee. She jumped onto the picnic table. “You know, most relationships involve some discussion.” She washed one paw. Apparently ours did not.

Blaze emerged from the tent several minutes later. He stretched. Front legs forward. Rear end up. Then shook hard enough to rearrange himself. The cat watched. Blaze saw her. His tail started. Not the frantic movement from a few days ago. Slower now. Familiar. He approached. The cat remained where she was. They touched noses. Neither recoiled. “Look at that.” Blaze looked at me. The cat didn’t. “International relations improving.”

I fed Blaze. The cat watched. I did not feed her. She watched harder. “Don’t.” Her eyes narrowed. “I checked.” That part was true. Ray had spoken again with the woman who cared for the barn cats. The cat was healthy. Spayed. Vaccinations current as far as anyone knew. And fed regularly. The woman had apparently laughed when Ray asked whether the cat belonged to her. According to Ray, her answer had been: “She belongs to herself.” I liked her immediately. The woman, I mean. Although the cat was making progress.

Ray came outside carrying coffee. He noticed the cat. “Still here?” “Apparently.” “Thought you weren’t adopting her.” “I’m not.” Ray nodded toward the table. “She know that?” “Communication has been difficult.”

The cat jumped down. Walked to Ray. Rubbed against his leg. Then returned to me. Ray smiled. “Looks pretty clear from here.” “Go find something broken.” He looked toward the workshop. “That won’t be difficult.”

We finished the fence before nine. Mostly. There was one section Ray insisted didn’t need repair. It leaned at an angle suggesting it disagreed. I pushed it. The entire section moved. Ray watched. “Still standing.” “So am I. That doesn’t make me a fence.” “You’d be a terrible fence.” “Exactly.” We repaired it.

Afterward, I washed up. The library had been bothering me since yesterday. Not in a bad way. Libraries rarely did. But once somebody tells me there is a person who knows the actual history behind something, leaving the question unanswered becomes difficult. Martha. Two streets over. I put my camera in my pack. Ray saw me. “Library?” “Yes.” “Thought so.” “Why?” “You’ve looked toward town six times this morning.” “I have not.” “Seven.” I looked toward town. Ray smiled. “Eight.”

Blaze came with me. The cat followed us to the end of Ray’s driveway. I stopped. She stopped. “No.” She sat. “We’re going into town.” Nothing. “You don’t need to come.” She blinked. I started walking. Blaze followed. After twenty feet, I looked back. The cat remained at the driveway. Good. Another twenty. Still there. “See?” Blaze looked back too. We continued. At the road, I checked again. Empty driveway. “Excellent.”

Three minutes later, Blaze stopped. I felt the leash tighten. He looked behind us. The cat was walking along the edge of the road. I closed my eyes. “No.” She continued. Blaze’s tail moved. “You knew.” He looked at me. “You absolutely knew.” The cat reached us. Walked past. And continued toward town. I stared after her. “This is ridiculous.” Blaze started following. Apparently the decision had been made.

I wasn’t comfortable letting her walk along the road. So our direct trip to the library became an indirect trip through quieter side streets and patches of open ground. The cat seemed familiar with them. That bothered me less than it should have. She moved ahead. Disappeared beneath a hedge. Reappeared beside a shed. Crossed behind us. Then walked along a low stone wall for nearly half a block. Blaze followed every movement with interest. “You’re being led by a cat.” He looked at me. “So am I.” That ended the discussion.

The library was small. One story. Brick front. A wooden sign near the entrance. Not impressive. Perfect. Then I encountered the problem. Blaze couldn’t come inside. The cat definitely couldn’t come inside. I stood on the sidewalk. They stood beside me. “This was poorly planned.” Blaze sat. The cat sat. I looked through the library window. So close. I looked at them. “No.” The cat looked toward the door. “Absolutely not.”

A woman inside noticed us. She disappeared. A minute later the door opened. Gray hair. Glasses. Cardigan despite the mild weather. She looked at Blaze. Then the cat. Then me. “Can I help you?” “Possibly. Are you Martha?” She studied me. “Depends who’s asking.” “Bone.” She nodded. “Ray’s traveler.” I paused. “That’s apparently spreading.” “Small town.” Fair.

I explained the hardware store. The conflicting dates. Ray’s history book. She listened. Then smiled. “Give me five minutes.” “That would be wonderful.” She looked at Blaze. “Don’t let him eat the flowers.” I looked at the planter. Blaze was sniffing it. “That’s remarkably specific.” “Experience.” She went inside.

We waited. The cat jumped onto the low wall beside the library. Blaze lay in the shade. I took out the camera. The cat saw it. Left. “You’re doing that deliberately.” She disappeared around the corner. I lowered the camera. Blaze sighed. “You are not helping.”

Martha returned carrying photocopies. Actual photocopies. I liked her even more. “Rear portion dates to 1911,” she said. “1911.” “Original building on that parcel was earlier, but most of it burned in 1910.” “Fire?” “December.” I looked at the pages. A newspaper clipping. A photograph. A property record. “Hardware store opened then?” “No.” Good. This was why I asked. “The rebuilt structure had several uses. Feed and seed for a while. General merchandise. Hardware came later.” “How much later?” “Depends what you count.” I smiled. “Of course it does.”

She explained. Different owners. Different business names. The building changed. Additions came and went. The front had been remodeled more than once. What locals called “the old hardware store” wasn’t one continuous business stretching back to the earliest photograph. The building had history. The business had history. They weren’t exactly the same history. I loved that. “So everybody was right.” Martha smiled. “That’s an optimistic interpretation.” “Everybody was approximately right.” “Better.”

I asked about the mill Ray mentioned. That led somewhere else. Of course. Martha went inside again. Came back with another copy. Then another. The mill had been important. Whether it employed “half the town” depended heavily on year and how loosely someone defined town. Ray’s memory wasn’t wrong. It was memory. Numbers told one version. People told another. I wrote that down.

“You interested in local history?” Martha asked. “History generally.” “Why?” I thought. “Places make more sense when you know what happened before you arrived.” She nodded. “Most people ask where to eat.” “I also ask that.” “Good.”

She looked at my camera. “Photographer?” “Sometimes.” “Professional?” “No.” “Good.” I laughed. “Why good?” “Professionals are always in a hurry.” “That’s probably not universally true.” “No.” She smiled. “But it sounded good.” Fair.

She pointed down the street. “If you want a photograph, don’t photograph the front of the hardware store.” “Why?” “Everybody photographs the front.” That was enough to interest me. “What should I photograph?” “Alley.” I looked. “Behind it?” “There’s a section of old foundation visible where the newer siding stops. And an old loading door.” I wrote that down. “Thank you.” “Don’t make it pretty.” I looked at her. “Why would I?” She smiled. Excellent.

We walked around the hardware store. The cat had reappeared. Naturally. She moved ahead of us as though she had arranged the tour. The alley wasn’t beautiful. Martha was right. Cracked pavement. Trash bins. Utility lines. Mismatched siding. A loading door that hadn’t been used in years. And below the newer wall, old masonry. Different era. Different materials. Different intentions. I took the reference shot first. Straight. Useful. Then moved. Blaze sat beside me. The cat disappeared beneath a parked truck. “Stay.” Blaze stayed. I crouched. The old loading door filled one side of the frame. Newer siding crossed above the original masonry. A modern utility box intruded near the edge. At first I tried to exclude it. Then stopped. Why? That was the point. Old building. New systems. Same place. I put it back in the composition. Waited. Cloud moved. Light softened. Click. I checked it. Better. Not beautiful. Good. Keeper.

A voice behind me said, “You taking pictures of my garbage cans?” I turned. The older man from yesterday stood at the alley entrance. “Not intentionally.” “That’s disappointing.” “I can if you’d like.” He laughed. Blaze stood. “Easy.” The man approached. Blaze sniffed. Tail. Approval. The cat emerged from beneath the truck. The man looked down. “Well, hello.” The cat walked toward him. He scratched her head. “You know her?” I asked. “Everybody knows her.” That was interesting. “Does she have a name?” He thought. “Not really.” “Nobody calls her anything?” “Barn lady calls her Little Girl sometimes.” I looked at the cat. “That’s not a name.” The man shrugged. “Cat doesn’t care.” Probably true.

The cat suddenly turned. Something moved near the garbage bins. Mouse. I saw it for approximately half a second. The cat saw it for considerably longer. She dropped low. Blaze noticed. I shortened his leash. “No.” The cat moved. Fast. The mouse disappeared beneath the building. The cat stopped at the gap. Waited. Blaze strained forward. “Leave it.” He looked at me. Then back. “Not your hunt.” The cat remained completely focused. Still. Patient. I watched. Something about her changed

when she concentrated. No casual wandering. No washing paws. No pretending we didn't exist. Every part of her aimed at the tiny gap beneath the building. The older man smiled. "Hunter." "Apparently."

The mouse did not reappear. Eventually the cat sat. Waited another minute. Then walked away as though the entire operation had been beneath her dignity. "Good effort," I said. She ignored me. The older man scratched his chin. "She's always been like that." "Like what?" "Shows up. Watches everything. Hunts. Leaves." I looked at her. She was now sitting beside Blaze. Watching the street. Something clicked. Not a decision. Not yet. Just a word. A name from a book. A girl who hunted. Independent. Watchful. Capable of deciding for herself where she belonged. I looked at the cat. "Katniss." Her ear moved. I stopped. The older man looked at me. "What?" "Nothing."

We headed back toward Ray's property. The cat followed. I tried the word again. Quietly. "Katniss." Her ear turned. Coincidence. Probably. "Katniss." She stopped. Looked back. Blaze looked at her. Then at me. "No." His tail moved. "Do not get involved."

I walked another twenty feet. "Katniss." The cat trotted forward. I stared. "That's inconvenient." Blaze wagged. "Very inconvenient."

At Ray's driveway, the cat turned in before us. Ray was beneath the hood of the mower. He looked up. "Find your history?" "Some." He noticed the cat. "She go with you?" "Against legal advice." "How'd that work?" "She ignored it." "Cat." "Apparently."

Ray wiped his hands. "What'd Martha say?" I gave him the short version. 1911 rear structure. Earlier building burned. Hardware business came later. Mill employment complicated. Ray listened. "So I was right." "Approximately." "That's right enough." "Martha would disagree." "That's why I don't ask Martha." I laughed.

The cat jumped onto the workbench Ray had dragged outside. I looked at her. "Katniss." She looked at me. Ray looked at me. "Katniss?" "Maybe." "Why?" "Hunter." Ray waited. "Book." "Ah." "Also she seems determined to make her own decisions." Ray looked at the cat. "That part fits." I walked several steps away. "Katniss." She jumped down. Followed. Ray nodded. "Looks named to me." "That's not how naming works." "How does it work?" I thought about Blaze. Little trailblazer. Blaze. No ceremony. Just something that suddenly fit. I looked at the cat. "Apparently exactly like this."

"Katniss." She rubbed against my boot. I sighed. "Fine." Blaze's tail thumped. "Nobody asked you."

I wrote it in my notebook. Cat: Katniss. Then immediately added: Not mine. Ray read over my shoulder. "Important distinction." "Extremely." "Probably write it bigger." I underlined it. Ray laughed.

That afternoon, we returned to the Volkswagen. Not because of Katniss. Not because of the name. Because Ray had found something. He came to camp carrying the old service manual. The one I had been carefully not touching. He dropped it onto the table. “Thought you might want this.” I looked at it. “I thought you weren’t selling.” “Thought you weren’t buying.” “Correct.” “Then reading’s harmless.” That was dangerous logic. I opened the manual.

Old diagrams. Maintenance procedures. Electrical systems. Engine specifications. Notes in margins. Some in Ray’s handwriting. Some weren’t. “These Ellen’s?” He leaned closer. “Some.” One note beside an electrical diagram read: ASK RAY BECAUSE I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT THIS MEANS. I looked at him. “You weren’t married yet?” “No.” “And she already delegated repairs?” “Efficient woman.” Another note read: FIXED! Below it, different handwriting: TEMPORARILY. I pointed. “You?” “Probably.”

We carried the manual to the van. Katniss followed. Blaze followed Katniss. I followed all of them. Again, parade.

The interior needed to be emptied before anything serious happened. Ray opened the side door. It complained. Katniss jumped inside. “Of course.” Blaze put his front paws at the opening. “No.” He looked at me. “She’s twenty pounds of bad judgment. You’re one hundred seventeen.” He stepped down. Katniss disappeared beneath the bench. Ray looked at me. “Twenty?” “I don’t know.” “She’s not twenty.” “Fine. Fifteen pounds of bad judgment.” A striped head appeared. “Possibly twelve.”

We started removing things. Old cookware. Blankets that had surrendered to mice. A cracked plastic container. Fishing tackle. Camp chairs. A lantern. Newspapers. One shoe. I held it up. Ray looked at me. “What?” I stared at the shoe. Blaze sniffed it. Katniss sniffed it. I started laughing. Ray looked concerned. “You all right?” “This keeps happening.” “What does?” “Abandoned shoes.” “It’s in a van.” “That doesn’t make it better.” “Whose is it?” “I was hoping you knew.” Ray examined it. “No idea.” I set it aside. “Of course.”

Then came the difficult part. Not physically. Personally. Every few minutes Ray found something that belonged to another life. A fishing license. A campground receipt. A deck of cards. A chipped mug. A folded road map. Most he looked at briefly. Some he discarded. Some he kept. I didn’t decide for him. That wasn’t my job. My job was carrying. Sorting. Cleaning. Waiting.

Near the rear cabinet, I found a small metal box. “Ray.” He looked. I handed it to him. He opened it. Photographs. Dozens. He sat on the van’s step. I moved away. Not far. Enough. Blaze lay in the shade. Katniss climbed onto the roof. Ray went through the photographs slowly. I

cleaned the opposite side of the van. After a while, he called me. “Bone.” I came over. He held one photograph. Ellen beside the van. Older than the photograph we’d found yesterday. Probably years later. She sat in a folding chair. Dog beside her. “Roscoe?” “Yep.” Big mutt. Not Blaze-big. But substantial. The dog had one paw on Ellen’s boot. I smiled. “Looks possessive.” “He was.”

Ray handed me another. The Volkswagen beside a lake. Another beside trees. Another with a child sitting on the bumper. “Your kid?” “Son.” Another. Two children. “Both?” “Yep.” The van had carried more than Ellen and June. More than Ray. More than vacations. It had been woven through years. That made the rust feel different.

Ray put the photographs back into the box. He kept one out. Ellen. Roscoe. Chair. Van. He looked at it. Then at Blaze. Blaze looked back. “Roscoe would’ve hated him.” “Blaze?” “Yep.” “Why?” “Roscoe hated every dog bigger than him.” Blaze yawned. “Then this would’ve been difficult.” “Very.”

Ray stood. He put the box beneath his arm. “Keep going.” I nodded. No conversation about what he’d found. None needed.

By late afternoon, the interior was mostly empty. Dirty. Very dirty. But visible. Cabinets. Bench. Storage compartments. Floor. Potential. I stood in the doorway. Blaze beside me. Katniss inside. Ray behind us. I imagined shelves. Food. Water. Camera gear. Books. Blaze’s supplies. Then I imagined Katniss knocking everything off those shelves. “Problem.” Ray looked. “What?” I pointed at the cat. She was inside an empty cabinet. “Future storage failure.” Ray laughed.

Katniss emerged. Jumped onto the bench. Curled up. I looked at her. “You don’t live here.” She closed her eyes. Ray walked away laughing.

We cleaned until evening. Then stopped. Not because we were finished. Because continuing after you’re tired is an excellent way to create tomorrow’s repairs. I had learned that too.

At camp, Ray brought dinner. I supplied bread. Blaze supplied supervision. Katniss supplied absolutely nothing. She sat on the table watching us. “Freeloader.” Her tail moved. Ray looked at her. “Katniss.” She looked at him. “See?” I frowned. “Coincidence.” “Katniss.” She jumped down and walked to Ray. He scratched her head. “Named.” I sighed. “Apparently.”

After dinner, Ray stayed by the fire. We talked about the van. Not price. Not ownership. Stories. The time it overheated on a mountain road. The time Ellen refused to turn around because the map clearly showed a road. There had been a road. Technically. The time their son got carsick three miles after Ray had cleaned the interior. The time Roscoe jumped

through an open window because somebody outside had a hamburger. Blaze raised his head. “Do not take notes.” Tail.

I laughed more than I expected. Ray did too. The van in his stories wasn’t precious. That surprised me. It broke. Smelled. Leaked. Got stuck. Carried too much. Started when it shouldn’t. Failed when it absolutely should have started. The memories weren’t valuable because the van had been perfect. They were valuable because people had been there.

Eventually Ray became quiet. Fire settled. Katniss curled beside me. Blaze lay on my other side. Ray stared into the flames. “Ellen would’ve wanted it fixed.” I didn’t answer immediately. “Maybe.” He looked at me. “You don’t believe me?” “I didn’t know her.” That surprised him. I continued. “You did.” Ray looked back at the fire. “Yeah.” “If you think she’d want it fixed, you’re probably right.” “She hated seeing things wasted.” I glanced toward the dark shape of the Volkswagen. “Then she would’ve hated your back lot.” Ray laughed. Hard. “Absolutely.”

After a while he said, “She’d have hated the moss.” “I like the moss.” “You’re not helping.” “It’s established.” “Growing.” “That’s how you know it’s healthy.” Ray shook his head.

Then he said something quietly. “I couldn’t sell it.” I waited. “After she died.” I nodded. “Figured I’d fix it.” He stared at the fire. “Then every time I started thinking about it, seemed like fixing it meant changing it.” That was almost exactly what I’d thought. I didn’t say that. “It was hers,” he continued. “Then ours. Then the kids grew up. Then it just...” He gestured toward the trees. “Stayed.” There was the word. Stayed.

Katniss stretched beside me. Blaze shifted. Ray looked at them. Then at my pack near the tent. “You really carry all his food?” “Yes.” “Water?” “Enough to reach reliable sources. More when I need to.” “Camera?” “Yes.” “Books?” “One or two.” “Your food.” “Unfortunately.” “Camping gear.” “That’s generally how camping works.” He nodded. “Too much.” “That’s what I’ve discovered.”

I looked toward the van. “I don’t want to stop walking.” “Didn’t say you should.” “That’s the part people misunderstand.” “About a vehicle?” “About why I’d want one.” Ray waited. “I don’t need something to travel instead of me.” I thought. “I need somewhere to leave what doesn’t need to be on my back.” He nodded. “Base camp.” “Moving base camp.” “That’s what Ellen called it.” I looked at him. “Really?” “No.” I stared. Ray smiled. “Got you.” “You’re terrible.” “Getting better.”

We sat quietly. Then Ray asked, “Where would you go?” “With the van?” “If it ran.” I looked at the fire. “Everywhere.” He laughed. “That’s not a destination.” “Neither is eventually.” “You use that one too?” “Frequently.”

I thought more seriously. “West first, maybe. Or south. Depends on season. Weather. Trails. Where Blaze can go. Places I haven’t seen. Places I’ve seen but not properly.” Ray nodded. “And after?” “Somewhere else.” He smiled. There was something different in his expression. Not a decision. Not yet. But something had moved.

The next morning, I found Ray beside the Volkswagen. Early. Earlier than usual. The photograph box sat on the passenger seat. He had the hood open. I approached. Blaze beside me. Katniss appeared from somewhere beneath the workshop. Ray looked up. “Morning.” “Morning.” “What are you doing?” “Looking.” “At?” “The van.” I waited. “That’s usually how looking works.” He ignored that.

I noticed the old curtains. Ellen’s curtains. Faded. Uneven. Terrible. Morning light passed through them. Ray touched one. “These are awful.” “I’ve mentioned that.” “She was proud of them.” “That doesn’t make them better.” “No.” He smiled. Then carefully removed one from its rod. I watched. “What are you doing?” “Taking them down.” Yesterday he’d said if the van stayed, they stayed. I remembered. Apparently he did too. He folded the curtain. Carefully. Not throwing it away. Preserving it. Different thing.

“Ray?” He kept folding. “Yeah?” “You sure?” He looked at the fabric. Then at the van. “Yeah.” He put it into the photograph box. Then removed the second curtain. Folded it. Placed it with the first. The windows looked strange without them. Larger. Brighter. Empty. Ready for something. I didn’t like that word. Ready. Too early.

Ray closed the box. “Let’s see if we can get this thing running.” I looked at him. “That’s different from selling it.” “Didn’t say anything about selling.” “Good.” “Thought you weren’t buying.” “I’m not.” “Good.” We stared at each other. Blaze’s tail thumped against the van. Katniss jumped through the open side door. Ray looked at her. Then at me. “Your cat’s in my van.” “Not my cat.” “Right.” “Also still your van.” “For now.” I looked at him. He picked up his toolbox. “For now?” Ray started toward the workshop. “First rule.” “Don’t make it worse?” He turned. “Exactly.” I looked at the Volkswagen. At Blaze. At Katniss sitting inside. Then at Ray disappearing into the workshop. Nothing had been decided. That mattered. But for the first time, Ray wasn’t trying to preserve the van exactly as it had been. And for the first time, I wasn’t trying quite as hard to pretend I didn’t want it. I put my hand against the faded metal. Cold. Rough. Real. “Don’t get excited.” Katniss blinked from inside. Blaze’s tail thumped again. I wasn’t entirely sure which of us I was talking to.

CHAPTER 15

First Rule

The Volkswagen did not start. This was not surprising. It had been sitting for nearly a decade. It had old fuel lines, questionable wiring, a battery that had long ago ceased participating in the electrical system, and tires whose principal contribution to transportation was keeping the rims approximately above the ground. Still, when Ray turned the key and absolutely nothing happened, we both stared at it. Blaze stared too. Katniss was sitting on the passenger seat. She seemed unsurprised. "Well," I said. Ray turned the key again. Nothing. "Maybe it didn't hear you." Ray looked at me. I shrugged. "Older vehicles." He turned the key a third time. The Volkswagen remained committed to retirement. Ray removed the key. "First rule." "Don't make it worse." "Right." He climbed out. I looked at the van. "Strong start." Katniss yawned.

We weren't actually trying to start it. Not properly. Ray had wanted to know whether anything electrical still responded when the key turned. Nothing did. That was information. Not particularly encouraging information. But information. Before we did anything else, we disconnected the remains of the old battery. Ray lifted it from the compartment. Or tried to. He stopped halfway. "Heavy." "Would you like help?" "No." He lifted again. It moved approximately an inch. I waited. Ray looked at me. "Fine." We carried it together.

Blaze followed us to the workbench. Katniss followed Blaze. I had begun noticing this. At first Blaze watched Katniss. Now Katniss occasionally watched Blaze. If he investigated something, she sometimes came over to determine whether he had discovered anything worth her time. Usually he had not. This did not discourage him. He sniffed the old battery. "Leave it." He looked at me. Katniss sniffed it. "That applies to you too." She jumped onto the workbench. Ray glanced over. "Training going well?" "Excellent."

The battery was finished. Ray had another one in the workshop. Of course he did. "What was this for?" "Truck." "Which truck?" "Blue one." I looked around the property. There were three blue trucks. "Helpful." "The old blue one." That narrowed it to two.

The replacement battery wasn't new either. But it held a charge. We checked it before putting it anywhere near the Volkswagen. Ray had a multimeter. He also had three battery chargers. One worked. One hummed ominously. One had a handwritten tag attached to the cord. MAYBE. I picked it up. "What does this mean?" Ray looked over. "Means maybe." "Maybe it works?" "Maybe." "Maybe it's safe?" "Probably." "Those are different maybes." "That's why I wrote it down." I put it back. Far back.

We spent most of the morning doing things that did not look like progress. Inspecting. Cleaning connections. Tracing wires. Looking for damage. Checking grounds. Making notes. Photographing things before we disturbed them. Ray caught me taking a picture of the battery compartment. "That's ugly." "It's reference." "You photograph everything?" "No." "Seems like everything." "I photograph things I might need to remember." Ray nodded toward Blaze. "You photograph him a lot." Blaze was lying beneath the workbench with his tongue hanging out. "Unfortunately." His tail moved.

We did not put fuel into the van. Not yet. The old lines looked exactly like old fuel lines that had been sitting for years. Which is to say they looked capable of turning a small problem into a very memorable afternoon. Ray pinched one. It cracked. We both stared at it. "Good test," he said. "You barely touched it." "Efficient test." "Replace all of them." "Yep." I liked working with Ray. He argued about fences. He argued about tools. He argued about whether something was actually broken. But when something mattered, he didn't pretend.

By lunchtime, the Volkswagen still hadn't moved. It hadn't made a sound. It hadn't demonstrated that any part of it remembered being a vehicle. But we had a list. Battery. Fuel system. Brakes. Tires. Electrical. Belts. Hoses. Fluids. Engine inspection before attempting anything enthusiastic. I looked at the list. "This is getting expensive." Ray looked at it too. "Yep." "Good thing I'm not buying it." "Good thing I'm not selling it." We looked at each other. Katniss walked across the paper. Ray moved his coffee. "Your cat." "Not my cat." She sat on the word TIRES. "She disagrees."

I fed Blaze. Katniss watched. Again. "You're fed elsewhere." She continued watching. "Your entire lifestyle is based on convincing multiple people you're starving." Ray opened a can of tuna. Katniss's head turned. I looked at Ray. "No." "What?" "Don't." "I'm making a sandwich." Katniss jumped down. Walked to him. Sat beside his boot. Ray looked at her. "Problem." "Yes." "She likes tuna." "Every cat likes tuna." "That's a broad statement." Katniss meowed. It was the first time I'd heard her do it. Ray looked delighted. I pointed at him. "Don't reward that." Katniss meowed again. Ray broke. Tiny piece. I stared. "Traitor." "She asked."

"She's manipulating you." "She's twelve pounds." "That doesn't make her less dangerous." Katniss ate the tuna. Blaze watched. Then looked at Ray. Ray looked at Blaze. "No." Blaze sat. "Don't." Blaze lifted one paw. Ray looked at me. "Does he do that on purpose?" "Yes." "That's impressive." "Do not admire the enemy."

Blaze received nothing from Ray. He received his normal lunch from me. He seemed satisfied with this outcome. Katniss received one additional piece of tuna when Ray thought I wasn't looking. I was looking. I wrote it down. Ray saw me. "What are you writing?" "Evidence."

After lunch, a truck came up the driveway. Older pickup. Red. It stopped near the workshop. A man got out. Maybe sixty. Work shirt. Jeans. Hands that looked permanently acquainted with machinery. He looked at Ray. Then me. Then the Volkswagen. Then Blaze. Then Katniss. "Ray." "Tom." The man nodded toward the van. "You're finally doing something with that thing?" Ray looked at me. I looked at Ray. "Apparently." Tom laughed. "Only took you ten years." "Nine." "That's better."

Ray introduced us. "Tom knows Volkswagens." Tom shook my hand. "Used to." "Difference?" "Age." "Yours or theirs?" He looked at me. Then smiled. "Both." I liked him.

Tom walked around the camper. Slowly. He didn't touch anything at first. That earned points. Then he crouched near one wheel. Looked beneath. Opened the engine compartment. Looked inside. Didn't immediately announce that everything was ruined. More points. Finally he stood. "Could be worse." Ray nodded. "That's what I said." "You said it was probably fine." "Same thing." "No."

Tom asked what we'd done. Ray explained. Battery out. Connections inspected. Fuel lines obviously finished. No attempt to run engine. Tom nodded. "Good." He looked at me. "His idea?" "Joint decision." Tom looked at Ray. "His idea." "Mostly."

We spent the next hour with Tom. Not fixing. Learning what we were dealing with. He pointed out places to inspect before attempting to start an engine that had sat for years. He wanted the fuel system made safe first. Brakes inspected before the vehicle moved under its own power. Tires replaced before road use regardless of how much tread they appeared to have. He wanted the engine turned carefully by hand before anyone got ambitious. Ray listened. So did I. I took notes. Tom noticed. "You always do that?" "Often." "Good." Ray said, "He photographs garbage cans too." "That happened once." Tom looked interested. "Good garbage cans?" "No." "Then why photograph them?" "I didn't." Ray smiled. I reconsidered liking him.

Tom eventually looked inside. Katniss was asleep on the rear bench. He stopped. “Cat come with it?” “No,” Ray and I said together. Tom looked at us. Katniss opened one eye. “Seems like it does.”

Blaze approached Tom carefully. Tom offered the back of his hand. Blaze sniffed. Then leaned his entire body against the man’s leg. Tom staggered. “Good lord.” “One hundred seventeen pounds.” “Of dog?” “Mostly.” Tom scratched Blaze behind the ears. Blaze approved Tom. The relationship became permanent immediately.

“What are you planning to do with it?” Tom asked. Ray didn’t answer. Neither did I. Tom looked between us. “Interesting.” “What’s interesting?” I asked. “Nothing.” “That was clearly something.” Tom smiled. “Call me when you decide.” “Decide what?” “Exactly.” He left. I watched his truck disappear down the driveway. Ray stood beside me. “I don’t like him.” “You called him.” “Still.”

We had a better list now. Longer. Of course. Tom had also given us names. A tire shop. A parts supplier. A mechanic who still worked on older Volkswagens when sufficiently persuaded. That last phrase was Tom’s. I wrote it exactly.

The afternoon became cleanup. There wasn’t much else we could safely do until parts arrived. Ray had some of what we needed. Not all. I was learning that Ray possessed an enormous quantity of objects and very few complete sets of anything. Seven screwdrivers. None the size we needed. Four boxes of electrical connectors. Three were empty. Two rolls of wire. Both six inches too short. “How is that possible?” Ray shrugged. “I use things.” “You preserve the packaging.” “Organization.” “This is archaeological evidence.”

I found another box. Old camping supplies. A dented kettle. Metal plates. Utensils. A small folding stove. A flashlight. A compass. Ray took the compass. Turned it in his hand. “Ellen’s.” I stopped sorting. He opened it. Needle moved. Still worked. “She used that?” “Constantly.” “Didn’t trust maps?” “Didn’t trust me.” “Reasonable.” He smiled.

Ray handed the compass to me. I looked at it. Then held it back. “Yours.” He didn’t take it. “It was hers.” “Exactly.” “She’d rather somebody use it.” I looked at him. Yesterday, curtains. Today, compass. Small things. But not small. “Ray.” “Take it.” I did. Not because I needed a compass. I already carried one. Because refusing would have meant something too. “Thank you.” He nodded. Then immediately picked up a cracked plastic cup. “Trash?” “Definitely.” He threw it away. Moment over. That was Ray.

I put Ellen’s compass in my pack. Not deep. Some things deserved to be accessible.

Late afternoon brought clouds. Not storm clouds. Just enough to soften the light. I had learned to notice. Ray and I were carrying another box from the van when I stopped. He almost walked into me. "What?" I looked toward the camper. Katniss was sitting on the roof. Again. Blaze sat on the ground beside the open side door. The old van behind them. Ray's workshop farther back. Nothing extraordinary. Except the light. The clouds had muted the hard afternoon sun. The faded paint no longer looked washed out. Rust became texture. The windows reflected trees. Katniss's striped coat separated cleanly against the sky. Blaze looked enormous below her. I set the box down. Ray followed my gaze. "Photo?" "Maybe." I took out the camera. Katniss looked directly at me. For once, she didn't leave. I raised it. Blaze turned his head toward the van. Katniss remained still. The old Volkswagen sat between them. Ground and roof. Dog and cat. Something waiting to move. Something not ready yet. Click. I checked the screen. Ray leaned closer. "Good?" "Maybe." "You always say maybe." "No." "You do." I looked again. "Keeper." Ray smiled.

We stopped work before dinner. My hands were dirty. My clothes smelled like old upholstery and dust. Blaze had somehow acquired a streak of grease on his forehead despite being prevented from helping. Katniss was immaculate. This seemed unfair. I wiped Blaze's head with a damp cloth. He tried to eat the cloth. "You're making an excellent argument for civilization." He sneezed.

Ray cooked that night. Nothing elaborate. Beans. Potatoes. Sausage for himself. Food for me. Blaze ate his own. Katniss appeared exactly when plates reached the table. Ray looked at me. "Don't." "I didn't say anything." "You were thinking it." "She's not getting sausage." Katniss sat beside him. Ray avoided eye contact. "Ray." "I'm eating." "Good." Katniss meowed. Ray closed his eyes. "She's very persuasive." "She's a criminal."

After dinner, I took Blaze for a walk. Katniss followed. I no longer argued. This concerned me. We went only a couple of miles. Blaze was getting stronger. Not dramatically. That's not how conditioning works. But I noticed changes. He settled into pace faster. Recovered more quickly after hills. Checked in with me more often. His paws looked good. His enthusiasm remained unreasonable. Katniss traveled differently. She followed until she didn't. Disappeared. Reappeared. Cut corners. Sat on fences. Investigated culverts. At one point she vanished for nearly ten minutes. I kept walking. Mostly. I checked behind us four times. Blaze checked six. "You're worse than I am." He looked back again. "Seven."

Then Katniss appeared ahead. Sitting on a fallen log. Waiting. Blaze accelerated. "Easy." He slowed. Katniss jumped down. We continued. Three travelers. I noticed the thought. Did not write it down.

The trail climbed slightly through trees. Not wilderness. Not remote. Just a patch of public land outside town where people walked dogs and children rode bicycles. We passed two runners. A couple with an elderly terrier. A man carrying a fishing rod. Blaze handled everyone well. Katniss avoided them entirely. Then we reached a small clearing. The clouds had opened near the horizon. Sunlight came through underneath. Low. Warm. The trees became dark silhouettes. I stopped. Blaze stopped. Katniss kept walking. "Of course." She reached the edge of the clearing. Sat. Blaze stood several feet behind her. The light caught both. I raised the camera. Waited. Blaze looked toward Katniss. Katniss looked toward the horizon. Click. The light changed almost immediately. Gone. I checked the image. Two silhouettes. Large dog. Small cat. Space between them. Same direction. I stared at it longer than necessary. Keeper. Definitely.

Back at Ray's property, he was still outside. He had dragged two old tires from beside the workshop. "Those aren't for the van." "No." "Good." "Just wanted to see what size they were." "Why?" He shrugged. I waited. Ray was terrible at pretending not to have a reason for something. Finally he said, "Called the tire place." I looked at him. "What did they say?" "Can get a set." "Price?" He told me. I winced. "That's unpleasant." "Yep." "You're buying tires?" "Didn't say that." "You called for tires." "Asked." "That's how buying begins." Ray pointed at me. "Thought you weren't buying the van." "I'm not." "Then stop spending my money." I smiled. "Fair."

He looked toward the Volkswagen. "Tom called too." "Already?" "Said he talked to that mechanic." "The persuadable one?" "Yep." "And?" "Might come look at it next week." I stared at Ray. "You're moving quickly." "No I'm not." "Compared to the previous nine years?" He considered. "Fair."

Katniss jumped onto the hood. Ray looked at her. "Get off." She sat. "That's paint." I looked at the rust. "Technically." Ray glared at me.

Blaze lay beneath the van's open side door. I sat on the step. Katniss eventually climbed through the passenger window and settled on the dashboard. Ray stood outside. For a while none of us spoke. I took Ellen's compass from my pocket. The needle settled. North. Steady. Uninterested in any of us. Ray noticed. "Works." "Seems to." "Ellen got us out of trouble with that thing more than once." "Because you didn't know where you were going?" "We knew where we were going." "That's different from knowing where you are." Ray looked offended. Then thoughtful. "That's actually pretty good." "I'm keeping it." "I meant the line." "So did I."

I turned the compass in my hand. Scratched case. Tiny dent near the hinge. No decoration. No visible inscription. Just something useful that

somebody had carried long enough to wear. I understood that. My hand went briefly to the walking staff leaning against the side of the van. Different object. Same idea. Useful things collect stories because people keep taking them places.

Ray sat beside me on the step. Katniss was above us. Blaze below. “Bone.” “Yeah?” “If we get it running...” He stopped. I waited. “If.” “Big if.” “If we get it running, it needs to be driven.” “Eventually.” “Vehicles don’t like sitting.” “I’ve gathered.” He rubbed his hands together. “You know how to drive?” I looked at him. “Yes.” “Manual?” “Yes.” He nodded. “Good.” Silence. I waited. He didn’t continue. “Was there another part to that?” “Nope.” “Ray.” “Nope.”

He stood. “Tomorrow we pull the wheels.” “To inspect the brakes.” “Yep.” “Not drive.” “Didn’t say drive.” “Not sell.” “Didn’t say sell.” “Not buy.” “Didn’t say buy.” He walked toward the house. I called after him. “This conversation is becoming repetitive.” “See you in the morning.”

I stayed on the van’s step. Blaze shifted closer until his shoulder rested against my knee. Katniss jumped down from the dashboard. She walked across the floor. Then climbed into my lap. I looked at her. “No.” She circled once. Lay down. “You have misunderstood the arrangement.” Purring. “You don’t belong to me.” More purring. “You’re not coming with us.” Her eyes closed. I stopped. Us. I had said us. Not me and Blaze. Us. I looked down at her. “No.” One eye opened. I pointed at her. “That was grammatical.” Eye closed. “Entirely grammatical.” Blaze put his head against my leg. I looked at him. “Don’t.” Tail against metal. Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. The sound echoed through the empty Volkswagen. I looked around the stripped interior. At the places where shelves might hold food. Where water could be stored. Where books could travel without weighing down my shoulders. Where camera gear could stay dry. Where Blaze could sleep. Where a cat, theoretically, could occupy every surface I wanted to use. The van didn’t feel like Ray’s memories had been removed. The photographs were safe. The curtains were safe. Ellen’s compass was in my hand. Maybe that was the difference. Preserving something didn’t always mean leaving it untouched. Sometimes it meant letting it continue. I didn’t write that down either. Not yet. Outside, the last light disappeared through the trees. Katniss purred. Blaze’s tail struck the van once more. Thunk. I looked toward the driver’s seat. Then at the key still hanging from the ignition. The Volkswagen couldn’t go anywhere. Neither, apparently, could I. At least not yet. And for the first time since I’d started walking, staying a little longer didn’t feel like failing to leave. It felt like part of the journey.

CHAPTER 16

Things Worth Carrying

The wheels did not want to come off. This was understandable. They had been attached to the Volkswagen for a very long time, and apparently nobody had informed them that circumstances had changed. Ray leaned on the breaker bar. Nothing. I leaned on the breaker bar. Nothing. Ray looked at me. “More.” “I am applying more.” “Doesn’t look like it.” “I’m a skeleton. Muscle definition is difficult.” He considered that. “Fair.” We tried again. The lug nut moved. Barely. But it moved. Ray smiled. “See?” “Excellent. At this rate we’ll have the wheel off Thursday.” “What day is it?” I thought about it. “That’s concerning.”

Blaze was lying beneath a tree. He had begun the morning beside us. That lasted until the first loud metallic crack from the breaker bar. Then he relocated. Not frightened. Just sensible. Katniss had chosen a different strategy. She sat on the roof of the Volkswagen. Watching. “She’s judging us,” Ray said. “She does that.” “You named her.” “That doesn’t make it my fault.” Katniss looked down. Ray nodded toward her. “Your cat.” “Still not my cat.” “We’re keeping count.” “Of what?” “How many days you say that.” “Why?” “Seems useful.” “It isn’t.” Ray smiled.

We got the first wheel off. Eventually. Ray rolled it aside. I looked at the exposed brake assembly. Then at Ray. Then back. “Well.” “Yep.” “That’s unpleasant.” “Yep.” “Tom was right.” “Don’t tell him.” “I wasn’t planning to.”

Years of sitting had not improved anything. Surface rust was expected. Other things required closer inspection. We cleaned carefully. Looked. Photographed. Made notes. Didn’t assume. That had become the rhythm. Ray had spent years looking at the van and seeing something he remembered. I had spent several days looking at it and seeing something that might travel. Neither perspective was particularly useful to a brake system. The brakes didn’t care about memory. They cared about whether they worked. At the moment, the answer was uncertain. Uncertain was enough to stop.

“We need Tom,” I said. Ray frowned. “We can inspect it.” “We are inspecting it.” “We can take it apart.” “Probably.” “Then why call Tom?”

"Because I'd like the wheels to stop after they start moving." Ray looked at the brake assembly. "Overrated." "Not in mountains." He sighed. "Fine."

He went toward the house. I stayed beside the Volkswagen. Blaze wandered over. He sniffed the removed wheel. "That's not food." He sniffed harder. "Still." Katniss jumped down from the roof. She landed on the seat through the open door, crossed the interior, jumped out the other side, and walked directly through the space where the wheel had been. "Katniss." She stopped. "Don't." She looked at me. "Grease." She stepped forward. I caught her. This was a mistake. Katniss had allowed me to pet her. She had slept in my lap. She had followed me into town. None of these things meant she had granted me authority to pick her up whenever I wanted. Her entire body became offended. Not violent. Not panicked. Just rigid. She looked directly into my face. "I know." Her tail twitched. "I understand your position." Blaze approached. "Stay out of this." He sat. I moved Katniss away from the wheel and put her down. She immediately turned around. Looked at me. Then deliberately walked in the opposite direction. "Good talk." She disappeared beneath the workbench. Blaze looked at me. "She'll come back." He continued looking. "I think."

Ray returned. "Tom says afternoon." "Good." He looked around. "Where's Katniss?" "Negotiations broke down." "Picked her up?" "How did you know?" Ray laughed.

With the brakes temporarily beyond our ambition, we moved to the interior. The inside had been emptied. Now it needed cleaning. Not decorating. Not rebuilding. Cleaning. There was a difference. The cabinets were worn but mostly sound. Some hinges needed work. The floor had stains that had probably acquired voting rights. The upholstery was beyond negotiation. But underneath the dirt, the camper was surprisingly intact. I opened one cabinet. Empty. Another. Empty. Another. Katniss. I stared. She stared back. "How?" Ray looked over. "What?" I pointed. He leaned closer. "Thought negotiations broke down." "They apparently resumed without me."

Katniss climbed out. Walked across the counter. Jumped onto the floor. Then rubbed against my leg. I looked down. "That's confusing." Ray nodded. "Cat." That explanation was becoming annoyingly useful.

We scrubbed. Blaze supervised from outside. Katniss repeatedly entered areas we had just cleaned. Ray found an old radio beneath one bench. Not built into the van. Portable. Plastic case. Cracked antenna. He wiped dust from it. "Ellen's?" "No. Kid's." "Which one?" "My daughter." I looked at him. "You have a daughter." "Yep." "You've mentioned your son." "Yep." "And somehow neglected the daughter." "Didn't come up." That was also Ray.

“Where are they now?” “Son’s in Idaho. Daughter’s in California.” “See them?” “Sometimes.” That answer had weight. Not enough for me to push. I didn’t. Ray noticed. He put the radio aside. “Laura calls.” I nodded. “Daughter?” “Yep.” “Son?” “Michael.” I waited. Nothing else came. So we kept cleaning.

Around eleven, a car pulled into the driveway. Not Tom. Small silver sedan. Ray looked through the van window. His expression changed. Not badly. Just unexpectedly. “Well.” A woman stepped out. Maybe mid-fifties. Jeans. Light jacket. Hair pulled back. She looked toward us. Then toward the Volkswagen. She stopped. Ray walked out. “Laura.” I stayed where I was. That seemed wise.

They hugged. Briefly. Comfortably. Not strangers. Not people who saw each other every week either. Laura stepped back. “What are you doing?” Ray looked at the Volkswagen. “Cleaning.” “I can see that.” She looked at him. “You haven’t opened that thing in years.” “Opened it yesterday.” “That is not helping your argument.” Ray glanced toward me. I considered hiding inside a cabinet. Katniss had already claimed the best one.

Laura noticed me. Ray waved. “Bone.” I stepped out. “Hello.” She looked at me for a moment. Not because I was a skeleton. People had stopped doing that a long time ago. Because I was a stranger standing beside her mother’s old Volkswagen. That made sense. “This is Bone,” Ray said. “He’s been helping around the place.” “Ray called me.” I looked at him. He hadn’t mentioned that. Laura continued. “Said he found Mom’s photographs.” Ray nodded. “Thought you might want to see them.” Her eyes moved to the van. “And now you’re fixing this?” “Looking at it.” “That’s not what it looks like.” “Mostly looking.” I liked Laura already.

Blaze approached. Laura saw him. “Oh.” Blaze stopped. His tail moved. I shortened the leash slightly. “Blaze.” Laura crouched. “Hi, Blaze.” He sniffed her hand. Then leaned. She nearly sat down. “Wow.” “One hundred seventeen pounds.” “I believe you.” She scratched his neck. Blaze decided Laura was acceptable. Then Katniss emerged from the van. Laura stared. “Whose cat?” Ray pointed at me. I pointed at Ray. “Nobody’s,” I said. “His,” Ray said. “Not mine.” Katniss walked directly to me and rubbed against my boot. Laura looked at Ray. Ray smiled. “Been like this all week.”

Ray brought out the photograph box. We moved to the picnic table. I started to leave. Laura noticed. “You don’t have to go.” “Family photographs.” “You’re the one who found them?” “Some.” “Then stay.” I did. But I sat at the far end. Blaze lay beneath the table. Katniss jumped onto it. Naturally.

Laura went through the photographs. Faster than Ray had. Then slower. She smiled at some. Laughed at others. Stopped completely at one. I couldn't see it from where I sat. "Mom hated that shirt." Ray leaned over. "She wore it all the time." "That's why she hated it." "Then why wear it?" "It was comfortable." Ray considered this. "That's ridiculous." Laura looked at his shirt. "You've owned that for fifteen years." Ray looked down. "This is different." "How?" "It still fits." Laura laughed.

She found the photograph of Ellen and Roscoe beside the van. The one Ray had shown me. Her smile changed. "God, that dog." "Meanest animal we ever owned." "He wasn't mean." "He bit the mailman." "The mailman kicked at him." "He bit the vacuum." "The vacuum deserved it." Ray nodded. "Fair." Blaze's head appeared from beneath the table. Laura looked down. "Roscoe would've hated you." Blaze wagged. "That's exactly what I said," Ray told her.

Then Laura found another photograph. She stared. Turned it toward Ray. "You kept this?" He looked. "Apparently." She slid it toward me. I hesitated. Then looked. The Volkswagen. A campground. Ray younger. Ellen beside him. Two children. Michael and Laura. And something painted across a small wooden board propped against the front bumper. The words were too small to read. "What does that say?" Laura smiled. "Temporary Home." Ray groaned. "I forgot that." "Mom made it." "Of course she did." "She hung it every time we camped." Ray shook his head. "Every time." Laura looked at me. "She said wherever the van stopped was home until it moved again." I looked at the photograph. Temporary Home. Interesting. I did not write it down.

Laura continued through the box. Eventually she found the curtains. Folded beneath the photographs. She touched them. Ray became quiet. "You took them down." "Yesterday." Laura looked at him. "You wouldn't let me replace those when I was sixteen." "They were your mother's." "They were hideous." "I know." "She knew." Ray looked surprised. "She did?" "Of course she did." Laura laughed. "She made them before she knew how to sew." Ray stared at the folded fabric. "She never said that." "She absolutely knew." For some reason, that seemed to help him.

Laura lifted one curtain. The faded pattern caught the light. "You throwing these away?" "No." "Good." Ray nodded. "Just don't think they need to stay in the van." Laura looked at him. Then at me. Then back. "No." She folded the curtain again. "They don't."

Nobody said anything for a while. Katniss stepped onto the photographs. Laura gently moved her. Katniss returned. Laura moved her again. Katniss returned. "Is this normal?" "Yes," Ray and I said together.

Laura looked toward the Volkswagen. “So what’s happening?” Ray leaned back. “Don’t know.” “You’re fixing it.” “Maybe.” “For you?” Ray looked at the van. “Don’t know.” Laura followed his eyes. Then looked at me. I suddenly became very interested in Blaze. She wasn’t fooled. “Bone?” “Yes?” “What do you do?” “Walk.” She waited. “Mostly.” “Where?” “Wherever I’m going.” Ray smiled. Laura didn’t. She was trying to understand. “You’re traveling?” “Yes.” “With him?” She nodded toward Blaze. “Now.” “And the cat?” “No.” Katniss sat on my notebook. Laura looked at her. “Right.”

I explained. Not everything. Enough. The walking. Camping. Photography. Books. History. Blaze. The problem of carrying food and water for a hundred-seventeen-pound dog. The idea of having a mobile base without replacing the walking itself. I did not say I wanted Ray’s van. Because that still wasn’t mine to want out loud. When I finished, Laura looked toward the Volkswagen. “Mom would’ve liked that.” Ray shifted. I said nothing. Laura continued. “Not the walking part.” “She liked walking.” “From the campsite to the lake.” “That counts.” “She complained the whole way.” “Still counts.”

Laura smiled. Then she looked at me. “She would’ve liked the photographs.” That caught me. “Why?” “She took terrible pictures.” Ray laughed. “Awful.” “Thumb over the lens.” “Half a head.” “Entire roll of a picnic table once.” “I remember that.” Laura pointed toward my camera. “She’d have been fascinated by someone who actually waited before taking one.” I looked at the camera. “Sometimes I still photograph garbage cans.” Ray made a triumphant sound. “See?” Laura looked confused. “Long story.”

Tom arrived after lunch. He took one look at Laura. “Well, look what the wind dragged in.” She hugged him. “You’re still alive.” “Barely.” “Still working on these?” Tom looked at the Volkswagen. “Apparently we’re all making questionable decisions now.”

The brake inspection became a group activity. Not because four people were needed. Because nobody wanted to leave. Tom showed Ray and me what he was seeing. What could be cleaned. What should be replaced. What needed closer inspection. Laura sat nearby with Blaze. Katniss sat on the workbench. At one point Tom removed a component and held it up. Ray frowned. “Can we save it?” Tom looked at him. “Why?” “It’s original.” Tom stared. “Ray.” “What?” “Do you want original brakes or brakes?” I tried not to smile. Ray saw me. “Don’t.” Tom set the part down. “Some things you preserve. Some things you replace so the preserved thing doesn’t end up in a ditch.” I stopped. Ray noticed. “What?” “Nothing.” “You’re doing the face.” “What face?” “The writing face.” “I don’t have a writing face.” Laura said, “You absolutely do.” “You met me three hours ago.” “Still.” I took out my notebook.

Tom looked pleased. “Writing down my wisdom?” “No.” “What’d you write?” I closed the notebook. “Nothing.” He tried to take it. I moved it. “Absolutely not.”

By late afternoon we had a real plan. Not a fantasy. Not put in a battery and see what happens. A plan. Brakes first. Fuel lines and fuel system. Electrical connections. Engine inspection. Fluids. Belts. Hoses. Tires before road use. Then, if all of that went well, we could discover the problems we hadn’t found yet. I looked at Tom. “Encouraging.” “Old vehicles are optimistic machines.” “Why?” “Because every time you fix something, they assume you’re willing to fix the next thing.” Ray nodded. “That’s true.”

Laura stayed. That surprised Ray. I could tell because he kept finding reasons to ask. “You heading back tonight?” “Maybe.” Twenty minutes later: “You got work tomorrow?” “No.” Later: “Hotel?” “I can stay here.” “You could.” Finally Laura looked at him. “Dad.” “What?” “I’m staying.” Ray nodded. “Okay.” He tried to make the word ordinary. Almost succeeded.

She helped me clean the interior. We removed the ruined upholstery. Under one cushion we found seventeen cents. Under another, a plastic dinosaur. Laura picked it up. She stared. “No.” Ray looked inside. “What?” She held up the dinosaur. “Michael.” Ray started laughing. “You remember?” “He lost this on the Oregon trip.” “Thought Roscoe ate it.” “He accused Roscoe for a year.” Laura turned the tiny dinosaur in her fingers. One leg was missing. “Can I keep this?” Ray looked at her. “It’s yours.” “No. It was Michael’s.” “Then steal it.” She smiled. “Good parenting.” “Worked so far.”

She put the dinosaur in her pocket. Another thing leaving the van. Another thing not lost. I was beginning to understand.

Near sunset, Laura asked to see my photographs. I hesitated. Not because they were private. Because photographs always looked different when someone else held them. I handed her the camera. She went through slowly. Creek. Rain. Trees. Old buildings. Blaze. More Blaze. She smiled. “You weren’t kidding.” “About?” “Photographing him.” “He gets in the way.” Blaze was asleep three feet away. Laura continued. Then stopped. The photograph from yesterday. Blaze beside the Volkswagen. Katniss on the roof. Soft light. She enlarged it. Ray came over. He had seen it on the camera before. Not like this. Laura looked at him. “Dad.” He stared at the photograph. “What?” “Look at it.” “I am.” “No. Look.” Ray did. I watched his face. The old van. The dog. The cat. Ray’s property. But none of the people who had once filled the Volkswagen were there. And somehow the photograph wasn’t empty. That mattered.

Laura handed the camera back. “Print that one.” I looked at her. “Why?” “For him.” Ray frowned. “I don’t need it.” “Which means yes.” “I have pictures.” “Old pictures.” Ray looked at the camera again. Laura said, “You need one of what it looks like now.” Silence. Ray looked toward the actual Volkswagen. Then back at me. “Can you?” “Eventually.” He nodded. “Yeah.” That was all.

After dinner, Laura and Ray went inside. I stayed outside. Blaze beside me. Katniss somewhere nearby. I could hear Ray and Laura laughing through an open window. Not constantly. Enough. I sat by the fire with my notebook. Ellen’s compass rested beside it. I opened the cover. Read what I’d written earlier. Some things you preserve. Some things you replace so the preserved thing doesn’t end up in a ditch. I crossed it out. Too mechanical. Too much Tom. I tried again. Keeping something doesn’t mean keeping every part of it. Closer. I looked at the van. The curtains were gone. But safe. The photographs were out of the damp interior. Laura had taken Michael’s dinosaur. The old brake parts would be replaced. The faded paint would stay. At least for now. The memories weren’t being erased. They were moving. That was different.

I wrote: Preserving something doesn’t always mean leaving it untouched. I read it twice. Then left it alone.

The compass sat beside the notebook. I picked it up. The needle settled. North. I remembered Ray teasing me. I remembered what I’d said. Knowing where you’re going is different from knowing where you are. That had sounded clever at the time. Tonight it sounded incomplete. Because I knew where I was. Ray’s property. A few miles outside a small town. Beside a Volkswagen that did not run. With a large dog asleep near my feet. A cat whose ownership remained under dispute. A family beginning to open boxes that had stayed closed for years. That was where I was. Where I was going remained considerably less certain. For once, I was comfortable with that.

Katniss emerged from beneath the picnic table. She jumped into the chair beside mine. Not my lap. Progress. I scratched behind her ears. She leaned into my hand. “You’re still not coming.” Purr. “I mean it.” Purr. Blaze opened one eye. “Don’t.” His eye closed.

The house door opened. Laura came outside carrying two mugs. She handed me one. Coffee. “Thanks.” She sat across from me. For a while we watched the fire. Then she said, “He’ll give it to you.” I looked at her. “What?” “The van.” I didn’t answer. “He doesn’t know it yet.” “That’s a large assumption.” “No.” She looked toward the workshop. “He couldn’t sell it because selling meant getting rid of Mom.” I waited. “But this isn’t that.” “No.” “You’re not asking him to get rid of it.” “I’m not asking him for anything.” “I know.” She smiled. “That’s probably why.”

I looked at the fire. “I don’t want him to regret it.” “He will.” That surprised me. Laura continued. “He’ll regret it the first day.” I looked at her. “The second too, probably.” “That’s not encouraging.” “He’ll miss it.” She shrugged. “That doesn’t mean it’ll be wrong.” That was better.

She looked toward the dark outline of the van. “When Mom died, everybody wanted Dad to clean things out.” “People do that.” “Closets. Garage. Camper.” She shook her head. “He wouldn’t.” “Maybe he wasn’t ready.” “He wasn’t.” She looked at me. “Maybe now he is.” I said nothing. There wasn’t anything useful to add.

The next morning, Laura was gone before I woke. She left a note on Ray’s door. I didn’t read it. Not mine. Ray came outside holding it. He looked tired. But good. “She left early.” “I noticed.” He folded the note. “Coming back next weekend.” “That’s good.” “Bringing Michael.” I looked at him. “Your son?” “Unless I’ve got another Michael.” “With you, I wouldn’t assume.” Ray smiled. Then looked toward the Volkswagen. “He’ll want to see it.” “Probably.” “He’ll have opinions.” “Definitely.”

We walked to the van. Blaze followed. Katniss appeared from the workshop. Ray put one hand on the roof. “Funny.” “What?” “Spent years thinking if I changed anything, I’d lose something.” I waited. He looked through the empty windows. “Yesterday felt like I got some of it back.” That one I did not write down. Some things didn’t belong in my notebook.

Ray walked toward the workshop. “Parts should be here tomorrow.” “Brakes?” “Some.” “Fuel line?” “Yep.” “Battery?” “Ordered.” I stopped. “You ordered a battery?” Ray kept walking. “Need one.” “For a van you’re not selling.” “Correct.” “That I’m not buying.” “Correct.” “That nobody has decided anything about.” He turned. “You’re catching on.”

I looked at the Volkswagen. Blaze sat beside me. Katniss jumped onto the hood. Again. “Get off.” She sat. I pointed. “Ray still cares about the paint.” She began washing a paw. “You’re impossible.” Blaze’s tail moved.

Then something occurred to me. The van had been sitting for years. Ray had preserved it by refusing to let it go. Now he was preserving it by changing it. Laura had preserved a piece of childhood by taking a broken plastic dinosaur home. The curtains had been preserved by removing them. Even Ellen’s compass was being preserved differently now. Not in a box. In my pocket. Things worth carrying. I liked that. Maybe that was the difference between a keepsake and a burden. A keepsake reminded you where you’d been. A burden prevented you from going anywhere else. I put my hand in my pocket. Felt the compass. Then looked at my backpack. Still too heavy. Blaze’s food. Water. Camera. Book. Gear. Everything I had considered necessary. Maybe the

Volkswagen wasn't the only thing being sorted. I took off my pack. Set it on the ground. Opened it. Ray saw me from the workshop. "What are you doing?" "Looking." "At?" "My pack." He waited. I smiled. "That's usually how looking works." Ray stared at me. Then laughed. "Smartass."

I emptied the pack onto the picnic table. Katniss immediately sat in the middle of everything. Of course. I started sorting. Things I needed. Things I used. Things I carried because I'd always carried them. Things that had once been useful. Things I might need someday. That last category was dangerous. Ray wandered over. He picked up a bent metal clip. "What's this?" "I don't know." "You carry it?" "Apparently." "Why?" "I might need it." "For?" "I don't know." Ray held it up. "Trash." "Wait." He looked at me. I looked at the clip. "Trash." He tossed it.

There was a paperback I'd finished three towns ago. I had intended to trade it. Hadn't. A length of cord. Useful. Spare batteries. Useful. Two pencils. Useful. Five pencils. Excessive. A small rock. Ray held it up. "Why?" I took it. I remembered. River. Months ago. Morning. The first really good photograph I'd taken after a week of terrible light. I had picked up the stone without thinking. I turned it in my hand. "Keeping." Ray nodded. No argument. He understood.

That was the rule, apparently. Not whether something had weight. Everything had weight. The question was whether it was worth carrying. I put the stone back. One pencil went with it. The other four stayed on the table.

By the time I finished, the pack was lighter. Not dramatically. Enough. I lifted it. Better. Blaze watched. "Your food is still the problem." His tail moved. "Don't look proud."

Ray picked up the discarded paperback. "Good?" "Pretty good." "Can I read it?" "That's why it's there." He tucked it under his arm. Another thing transferred instead of discarded. I smiled.

Katniss climbed into the open backpack. I stared. "No." She curled up. "Absolutely not." Ray looked over. "How much does she weigh?" "Don't." "Could add her to the pack calculation." "She is not gear." "Didn't say she was." I lifted Katniss out. This time she tolerated it. Mostly. I set her on the table. She immediately climbed back into the pack. Ray laughed. Blaze's tail thumped. I looked at both of them. "This family is becoming extremely unhelpful." I stopped. Again. Family. Not group. Not animals. Not companions. Family. Ray didn't react. Maybe he hadn't noticed. I had.

I looked at Blaze. Then Katniss. Then the Volkswagen. Nothing was finished. The van didn't run. Ray hadn't offered it. I hadn't asked. Katniss had never formally joined anything. Blaze was still learning how to live on the road. I still didn't know where we'd go next. But perhaps

journeys weren't built from finished things. Maybe they were built from things you decided were worth carrying while they were still becoming. I closed the pack. Katniss sat on top of it. I let her. For now.

CHAPTER 17

The Parts That Move

The parts arrived in three boxes. One was the size of a shoebox. One was large enough to suggest optimism. The third looked as though it had been packed by somebody angry with geometry. Ray stood over them with a knife. Blaze stood beside him. Katniss sat on the smallest box. I held the packing slip.

"Before you open anything."

Ray looked at me.

"Inventory."

"I know how boxes work."

"That wasn't the concern."

He cut the first one open. Katniss immediately tried to climb inside.

"Of course."

The first box contained brake parts. Correct ones. The second contained hoses, belts, filters, and several small pieces that looked far too insignificant for what they cost. The third contained the battery. And packing paper. Enough packing paper to insulate a house. Ray pulled the battery out. Blaze sniffed the box. Katniss disappeared into it. I heard rustling.

"Leave her."

Ray looked at me.

"Thought she wasn't yours."

"She's currently not mine inside a battery box."

"Important distinction."

Tom arrived before breakfast was entirely over. I had coffee. Ray had coffee. Tom had coffee he brought himself. Blaze had already eaten. Katniss had apparently eaten elsewhere, which did not stop her from inspecting all four of us for additional opportunities. Tom looked at the parts. Then the van. Then Ray.

"You actually ordered things."

Ray frowned.

“That’s usually how parts get here.”

“Never thought I’d see the day.”

“You’re welcome to leave.”

“No.”

Tom picked up the new brake hose.

“Good.”

That was apparently his entire review. We started with the brakes. Slowly. Not because anyone was trying to be dramatic. Because old bolts had opinions. Some surrendered. Some required persuasion. One required heat. That became Tom’s job. I stood back. Very far back. Blaze was moved farther. Katniss vanished entirely.

“Smartest one here,” I said.

Tom looked at Ray.

“Your cat?”

“His.”

“Not mine.”

Tom nodded.

“Still doing that?”

“Yes.”

“How long?”

“Until accuracy improves.”

The old hose came free. Tom held it up. Cracked. Stiff. Finished. Ray looked at it.

“Original.”

Tom dropped it into the discard pile. Ray stared.

“You could’ve set that down.”

“Could’ve.”

“That was original.”

“So was lead paint.”

Ray looked at me.

“Don’t write that down.”

I already had. We worked through the morning. Remove. Inspect. Clean. Replace. Reassemble. Nothing cinematic. Nothing fast. No magical resurrection of the Volkswagen. Just one system becoming slightly less dangerous than it had been the day before. I liked that. There was something reassuring about mechanical work. It didn’t care what anybody hoped. If a line leaked, it leaked.

If a fitting was stripped, it was stripped. If something needed replacing, sentiment did not alter the wrench size. That was useful. Around ten, a car pulled in. Laura. Again. She got out carrying a bag. Ray looked surprised.

“I thought next weekend.”

“Plans changed.”

“Michael?”

“Tomorrow.”

She held up the bag.

“Breakfast.”

Tom looked at her.

“We already ate.”

“Then second breakfast.”

Tom took the bag.

“Good to see you.”

Laura had brought pastries. Katniss materialized. I don’t know from where. One moment she was absent. The next she was beside the table.

“You can’t have that.”

She looked at the bag.

“No.”

Blaze looked at the bag.

“Also no.”

Tom ate two. I wrote nothing down. Laura watched us work. Not closely at first. Then closer. Eventually she crouched beside Ray.

“What does that do?”

“Brake cylinder.”

“And that?”

“Line.”

“And that?”

Tom said, “Stops your father from driving through a fence.” Ray looked up.

“I’ve never driven through a fence.”

Laura laughed.

“You hit one.”

“Backed into.”

“Still.”

Tom nodded.

"Family record supports my statement."

Laura stayed near the van. Not helping much. Not leaving either. At one point she went inside and came back with the old photograph box. She took several pictures out. Not ours. The originals. She sat in a chair beside the workshop. Katniss jumped into her lap. Laura looked at me.

"Is this allowed?"

"Apparently."

"Should I ask?"

"No point."

She scratched Katniss behind the ears. The cat closed her eyes.

"She's sweet."

"When convenient."

Blaze wandered over. Laura reached down. He put his head in her lap. Katniss opened one eye. Blaze froze. I watched. Laura watched. Tom stopped working. Ray noticed everyone had stopped.

"What?"

Katniss extended one paw. Placed it on Blaze's head. No claws. Just paw. Blaze did not move. Not even slightly. Tom whispered, "What happens now?"

"Nobody knows."

Katniss withdrew her paw. Closed her eyes again. Blaze exhaled. Laura started laughing. I reached for the camera. Too late.

"Of course."

By noon, the first side was back together. Not finished. But together. Tom stood. Stretched.

"Other side."

Ray stared at him.

"After lunch."

"Getting soft."

"I'm seventy-one."

"Excuses."

Ray looked at me.

"He's older than I am."

Tom ignored this. Lunch became sandwiches. Tom ate quickly. Ray ate slowly. Laura asked questions. I listened. Some stories I'd heard. Some I hadn't. Michael once locked himself inside the camper bathroom. Laura corrected Ray.

"There wasn't a bathroom."

"Then the closet."

"It wasn't a closet."

"It had a door."

"That doesn't make it a closet."

Ray looked at me.

"See what I lived with?"

Laura pointed at him.

"You built a shelf in front of the latch."

"Temporary."

"I was eight."

"Worked eventually."

"Michael had to climb through the window."

"He fit."

I liked this family. Laura showed me one of the photographs. The van at a campsite. Temporary Home sign hanging from the front. Ellen cooking. Ray holding something out of frame. A child sitting on the bumper.

"What year?"

"Maybe eighty-six."

"Where?"

"Oregon coast."

"Cold?"

"Always."

Ray called from the table.

"Wasn't cold."

Laura didn't look away from the photograph.

"It was forty-eight degrees."

"That's not cold."

"For summer, it is."

I took a picture of the photograph. Reference only. Not keeper. Something about the way Ellen was turned toward the van mattered. Not posing. Using it. Cabinet open. Pan in hand. Door half closed. The camper wasn't the subject. It was part of what was happening. That felt important. The afternoon moved faster. Not because the work became easier.

Because we understood the rhythm. Tom called out tools. Ray handed the wrong one. I handed the right one. Ray complained. Laura laughed. Blaze slept. Katniss moved from shade to shade. At one point, I looked over and found her asleep inside the open tool bag.

“Problem.”

Tom looked.

“Leave her.”

“I need that wrench.”

“Use another.”

“I need that one.”

Katniss opened one eye. I reached. She put one paw over the wrench. Tom smiled.

“Negotiations.”

I looked at the cat.

“Katniss.”

Nothing.

“Move.”

Nothing.

“Please.”

She stood. Stretched. Stepped out. Tom looked impressed.

“See? Yours.”

“That proves nothing.”

By late afternoon, the brakes were not road-ready. But they were closer. Tom wanted everything checked again after the new lines settled. He wanted the system properly bled. He wanted the remaining components inspected before anyone moved the van. Ray nodded. So did I. Laura asked, “How long before it runs?” Tom looked at her.

“Runs or drives?”

“Both.”

“Different questions.”

“Runs.”

He looked at the engine.

“Could be soon.”

Ray’s face changed. Only slightly. Laura noticed. So did I. Tom walked to the rear. Opened the engine compartment.

“We could inspect the engine now.”

Ray looked at the light. Still enough.

“Let’s.”

I took out my notebook. Tom smiled.

“Writing face.”

“Don’t.”

We removed the spark plugs. Carefully. Old. Not catastrophic. Tom looked at them one by one. Then at the engine.

“No obvious bad news.”

“That’s good?” Laura asked.

“Very.”

Ray folded his arms.

“Can we turn it?”

Tom nodded.

“By hand.”

Important distinction. The engine did not want to turn. At first. Tom applied pressure. Stopped. Adjusted. Tried again. Nothing. Ray watched without speaking. I watched Ray more than the engine. Tom tried again. Movement. Small. But movement. Ray leaned forward.

“Again.”

Tom did. The engine turned farther. No grinding. No sudden stop. No awful sound. Just resistance. Then motion. Tom smiled.

“Well.”

Ray looked at me.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re doing the face.”

“I’m not.”

Laura said, “He is.” Tom turned the engine through another partial rotation. Carefully. Then stopped.

“That’s enough.”

Ray almost argued. Almost. Then nodded. First rule. Don’t make it worse. We put everything back. Nothing started. Nothing drove. But the engine had moved. After years. Ray touched the rear panel.

“Still in there.”

Tom looked at him.

“Usually where engines stay.”

Ray ignored him. The sun dropped. Tom packed his tools.

“Tomorrow?”

Ray asked. Tom shrugged.

“Maybe.”

“That’s not useful.”

“Thought you liked maybe.”

“Not from mechanics.”

“Nobody does.”

He left. Laura stayed. Again. We sat outside. Not quite dinner. Not quite campfire. Just the space between work and evening. Blaze lay on the ground. Katniss sat on the hood. Ray had stopped telling her to get off. I noticed that. Didn’t mention it. Laura looked at the van.

“Dad.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you remember the first time it broke down?”

Ray laughed immediately.

“Arizona.”

“You said California.”

“No. First breakdown was Arizona.”

“What happened?”

“Fuel pump.”

Laura looked at me.

“See? I told you.”

“You said starter.”

“That was California.”

Ray shook his head.

“Starter was Nevada.”

They argued for ten minutes. Nobody won. I enjoyed all ten. Then Laura said, “Mom kept everything.” Ray nodded.

“Yep.”

“Even broken things.”

“Yep.”

“Why?”

Ray thought.

“Thought everything might be useful again.”

Laura looked toward the workshop.

“That explains a lot.”

Ray smiled. I thought about my pack. The bent clip. The rock. The book Ray had taken. The compass. Things worth carrying. Things worth fixing. Things worth letting go. It was becoming difficult to tell where one category ended and the next began. Maybe that was normal. Michael arrived the next morning. Not alone. He drove a pickup.

Older. Blue. Of course. A teenage boy sat in the passenger seat. Michael got out first. Late fifties, maybe. Taller than Ray. Same eyebrows. That was the first thing I noticed. The second was the way he stopped when he saw the Volkswagen. Laura had stopped too. But differently. Laura had looked surprised. Michael looked ambushed. He stood beside the truck.

Didn't move. Ray walked toward him.

"Hey."

Michael looked at him. Then at the van.

"What are you doing?"

"Working on it."

Michael's jaw tightened.

"Why?"

Ray stopped. I took Blaze's leash. Moved farther away. Laura came outside.

"Michael."

He looked at her.

"You knew?"

"I came yesterday."

"You knew."

"I knew he opened it."

Michael looked at Ray.

"You never let anyone touch that thing."

Ray's voice stayed calm.

"I know."

The teenager got out. Probably Michael's son. Ray waved him over.

"This is Evan."

I nodded. Evan nodded back. Then saw me. Skeleton. Fedora. Beard. Dog. Cat. Old Volkswagen. He took all of that in.

"Cool."

That was it. I liked Evan. Michael walked around the van. Slow. Same way Tom had. But for different reasons. He touched the side panel. Looked through the window. Opened the sliding door. Saw the stripped interior. Stopped.

"Where are the curtains?"

Ray didn't answer immediately.

"Safe."

Michael turned.

“Safe where?”

“In the house.”

“Why’d you take them down?”

“They needed to come down.”

“No, they didn’t.”

Laura said, “Yes, they did.” Michael looked at her.

“You don’t get to decide that.”

“Neither do you.”

There it was. The thing that had been waiting. Ray stepped between them. Not physically. With his voice.

“I decided.”

Michael looked at him.

“Why now?”

Ray looked toward the van. Then at me. I wished he hadn’t. Michael followed his eyes. His expression changed. Not anger exactly. Suspicion.

“Who’s he?”

Ray said, “Bone.”

“That doesn’t answer the question.”

“I travel.”

Michael stared.

“With my dad’s van?”

“No.”

Ray said, “Maybe.” I looked at him.

“Ray.”

Michael looked between us.

“What does maybe mean?”

“Means maybe.”

“This isn’t funny.”

Ray’s face changed.

“No.”

It wasn’t. Laura stepped closer.

“Michael, nobody’s stolen anything.”

“He starts fixing it after ten years and some stranger is camped in the yard.”

I understood that. Completely. If I had arrived and seen the situation from the outside, I might have thought the same. I said, “You’re right.” Everyone looked at me. Michael frowned.

"About what?"

"That it looks suspicious."

Ray started to speak. I held up one hand.

"It's your family's van."

Michael's shoulders remained tight.

"I haven't asked for it."

He looked at Ray.

"I haven't paid for it. I haven't been promised it. I don't own any part of it."

Ray opened his mouth. I continued.

"And if Ray decides tomorrow that he wants it covered up and left exactly where it was, that's what happens."

Ray frowned.

"We're not doing that."

"Not helping."

Michael studied me. Blaze sat beside my leg. Katniss jumped onto the Volkswagen's roof. Naturally. Michael pointed.

"Whose cat?"

I closed my eyes. Laura laughed. Ray laughed. Even Evan laughed. Michael looked confused.

"Long story," I said.

The tension loosened. A little. Enough. Ray brought out the photographs. That changed everything. Not immediately. But slowly. Michael sat. Laura sat beside him. Evan looked over their shoulders. Ray handed them the box. Michael went through it. He didn't laugh as quickly as Laura had. He paused more. Longer. At the plastic dinosaur photograph, Laura reached into her bag.

She had brought it. She set the little dinosaur on the table. Michael stared.

"You found that?"

"Under a cushion."

He picked it up. One leg missing. His face softened.

"Roscoe ate this."

Laura smiled.

"No he didn't."

"I blamed him."

"For a year."

"He deserved it."

Ray nodded.

"Probably."

Michael held the dinosaur. Turned it over. Evan looked at him.

"That's yours?"

"Was."

"Why does it have one leg?"

Michael looked at Laura.

"Roscoe."

Laura pointed.

"Still no."

Then came the Temporary Home photograph. Michael stared at it. Longer than anyone else had.

"Mom made that sign."

Ray nodded.

"Yep."

"Where is it?"

Nobody answered. Ray looked toward the workshop.

"Don't know."

Michael looked up.

"What do you mean?"

"Probably somewhere."

Laura said, "That's not helpful." Ray stood.

"Could be in the garage."

Michael stood too. They searched. We all searched. This became the entire morning. The sign was not in the garage. Not in the workshop. Not in the van. Not behind the shed. Not in the attic above the workshop. Ray had boxes. So many boxes. I stopped counting. Every one contained something almost relevant. Old lantern parts. Fishing reels.

License plates. Maps. Socks. A wrench. Photographs. A Christmas ornament. Three radios. One roller skate. No sign. Evan found an old road game.

"What's this?"

Michael looked.

"License plate game."

"How does it work?"

"You find plates."

"That's it?"

"That was entertainment."

Evan stared at him.

"The past sounds terrible."

I laughed. Around noon, I moved a stack of plywood. Behind it was a narrow wooden board. Weathered. Paint faded. I knew before I turned it over. Temporary Home. The lettering was uneven. Hand-painted. Small peace symbol beneath. I carried it outside.

"Found it."

Everyone stopped. Michael took it. Not Ray. Michael. He ran his hand across the letters.

"Mom made this."

Ray nodded. Laura smiled. Evan took a photograph with his phone. I almost laughed at that. Old sign. New camera. Same family. Michael held it for a while. Then walked to the Volkswagen. He propped it against the front bumper. Exactly like the old photograph. Nobody spoke. I picked up my camera. Stopped. This wasn't mine automatically. I looked at Michael.

"Okay?"

He thought. Then nodded.

"Yeah."

I stepped back. Ray stood beside the van. Laura beside him. Michael holding the sign. Evan slightly behind them. Not posed exactly. Not comfortable enough to be polished. Better. I raised the camera. Waited. Katniss appeared on the roof. Of course. Blaze wandered into the edge of the frame. I almost moved him. Didn't. Click. I checked the image.

Four generations of memory if you counted Ellen's sign. Three generations of people. A van that still didn't run. A cat who belonged to nobody. A dog who belonged exactly where he stood. Keeper. I lowered the camera. Michael looked at me.

"Can I get that one?"

"Yes."

"Thanks."

Then he looked at the van.

"What does it need?"

That was different. Ray heard it too. We spent the afternoon showing him. Brakes. Fuel lines. Battery. Engine inspection. Tires. Michael knew enough to ask useful questions. Not enough to pretend expertise. Good. Evan mostly listened. Sometimes photographed details with his phone. At one point he took a picture of me under the van.

"Why?"

"Looks cool."

"I'm holding a flashlight."

"Still."

Fair. Michael looked at the stripped interior.

"You're keeping the cabinets?"

Ray looked at me. I looked at Ray.

"They're good," I said.

"Mostly."

Michael nodded.

"Mom hated replacing anything that still worked."

Laura said, "Mom hated spending money."

"Also true."

Ray touched one cabinet.

"Needs refinishing."

Michael smiled.

"She'd complain."

"Yep."

"Then approve."

"Eventually."

The conversation shifted. Not ownership. Not yet. What to keep. What to replace. What to repair. What mattered. Michael wanted the cabinet doors. Laura wanted the curtains saved but not rehung. Ray wanted the exterior paint untouched. I agreed with that. At least now. Evan wanted USB charging ports. Everyone stared at him.

"What?" he said.

Michael looked horrified.

"In that?"

"Yes."

Ray considered.

"Useful."

Michael looked betrayed. Laura laughed. I stayed out of most decisions. They weren't mine. But I listened. That was enough. Maybe more than enough. Late afternoon, Michael found me by the workbench. Alone. Mostly. Blaze was nearby. Katniss was asleep on a coil of rope. Michael leaned against the bench.

"You really walking everywhere?"

"Not everywhere."

"Mostly?"

"Mostly."

"Why?"

I smiled.

"People ask that."

"Do you have an answer?"

"Several."

"Best one?"

I thought.

"Because moving slowly gives places time to become more than scenery."

Michael looked toward the van.

"That's annoyingly good."

"I've had practice."

He nodded toward Blaze.

"And him?"

"Recent complication."

Blaze's tail moved.

"Good complication?"

"Very."

Michael smiled.

"Mom liked dogs."

"I gathered."

"She'd like him."

"Blaze tends to assume that about everybody."

Silence. Then Michael said, "Dad won't say it."

"Say what?"

"He's thinking about giving you the van."

There it was again. Laura had said the same. I looked at Michael.

"He's said nothing to me."

"I know."

"You okay with it?"

Michael laughed once.

"No."

Fair.

Then:

"Maybe."

Also fair. He looked toward the Volkswagen.

"I thought it'd stay there forever."

"That was the plan?"

"No."

He rubbed his hands together.

"I just never thought about it moving."

I understood.

"Movement changes what something means."

"Yeah."

"Doesn't erase what it meant before."

Michael looked at me.

"That yours?"

"Maybe."

"Write it down."

I did. That evening, Michael and Evan left. Laura stayed one more night. Before leaving, Michael put the Temporary Home sign inside Ray's house. Not the van. Interesting. He hugged Ray longer than when he'd arrived. Then shook my hand.

"Don't wreck it."

"I don't own it."

"I know."

He smiled.

"Still."

After the truck disappeared, Ray stood in the driveway. Laura beside him. I gave them space. Eventually Ray came back. He looked tired again. But lighter. He sat at the picnic table. I sat across from him. Laura brought coffee. Blaze lay underneath. Katniss climbed onto the table. No one moved her. Ray looked at me.

"That could've gone worse."

"Yes."

Laura said, "He could've punched Bone." Ray looked at my face.

"Would that hurt?"

"Emotionally."

Laura laughed into her coffee. Ray stared at the van.

"He was mad."

"He was scared," Laura said.

Ray nodded.

“Same thing sometimes.”

I wrote that down. Ray saw.

“Really?”

“Good line.”

“Mine?”

“Apparently.”

He smiled. Night settled. We didn’t light a fire. Too tired. The yard became quiet. I took out Ellen’s compass. Set it on the table. The needle moved. Settled. North. Laura watched.

“Mom’s?”

“Ray gave it to me.”

She looked at him. He nodded. Laura didn’t object. That mattered more than I expected. She opened the compass. Touched the dent near the hinge.

“She dropped this off a cliff.”

I looked at her.

“What?”

“Small cliff.”

Ray said, “It was an embankment.”

“She said cliff.”

“She was dramatic.”

Laura smiled.

“It landed in bushes.”

“Still worked.”

I looked at the dent. Another story. Of course.

“Do you know where you’re going next?” Laura asked.

“No.”

“You told Dad west or south.”

“Those are directions.”

“That’s generally how going works.”

I looked at Ray.

“Your family has become contagious.”

I turned the compass.

“Knowing where you’re going doesn’t always mean knowing where you are.”

Laura nodded.

"That's good."

"Ray already claimed it."

"I did not," Ray said.

"You said it was good."

"Different."

I looked toward the Volkswagen.

"Maybe the reverse is true too."

Laura waited.

"You can know exactly where you are and still not know where you're going."

Ray smiled.

"That's worse."

"Why?"

"Less comforting."

"Probably more accurate."

Katniss walked across the table. Stepped over the compass. Sat on my notebook. I looked at her.

"You're making a point?"

Nothing.

"Good."

The next morning, Tom arrived with a fuel line. He held it up.

"Ready to make something smell terrible?"

Ray smiled.

"Finally."

"That's not reassuring," I said.

Tom ignored me. We replaced the old lines. Cleaned what could be cleaned. Checked what could be checked. Nothing reckless. Nothing improvised near fuel. Tom insisted on that. Good. The old fuel was dealt with properly. The tank needed more attention than Ray hoped. Less than Tom feared. That counted as victory. The new battery went in. Connections cleaned.

Grounds checked. We tested electrical systems without trying to start the engine. One interior light came on. Everyone stopped. Tiny light. Weak. Yellow. But on. Ray stared. Laura clapped once. Tom said, "Don't get excited." I looked at him.

"That's my line."

"Better when I say it."

Then the horn went off. Blaze jumped. Katniss launched from the roof. Laura screamed. Ray hit his head on the doorframe. Tom laughed so hard he had to sit down. The horn continued. BEEEEEEEEEEEEP.

"MAKE IT STOP."

"I'm trying!"

BEEEEEEEEEEP. Blaze barked. The horn answered. BEEEEEEEEEEP.

"Blaze, no!"

Bark. BEEEEEEEEEEP. Tom was useless. Completely. Finally Ray disconnected the battery. Silence. Everyone froze. Katniss was now under the picnic table. Blaze stared at the van. Ray rubbed his head. Laura leaned against the workshop laughing. Tom wiped his eyes. I looked at the Volkswagen.

"Electrical system works."

Ray glared at me. I took out my notebook.

"Don't."

Too late. Ten minutes later, the problem made sense. Old horn circuit. Stuck contact. Fixable. No magic. No haunting. Slightly disappointing. That afternoon, after Laura left, Ray and I sat beside the van. Tom had gone. Blaze slept. Katniss had forgiven the horn enough to sit twenty feet away. Ray held the key. Turned it between his fingers.

"We're close."

"To starting it."

"Yep."

"Not driving."

"I know."

"Brakes still need final work."

"I know."

"Tires."

"I know."

"Fuel system."

"I know."

I stopped. Ray looked at me.

"Done?"

"Probably."

He held out the key. I looked at it.

"Why?"

"Tomorrow."

"What about tomorrow?"

“If Tom says we’re ready.”

I waited.

“You turn it.”

I frowned.

“It’s your van.”

“For now.”

There it was again. For now.

“I think you should.”

Ray shook his head.

“I’ve started it before.”

“Nine years ago.”

“Still.”

He held the key closer.

“You’re the reason we’re doing this.”

I looked at him.

“No.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Laura.”

“No.”

“Michael.”

“No.”

“Ellen.”

Ray looked away. That one landed. I continued.

“Maybe I showed up at the right time.”

He looked back.

“Same thing.”

“It isn’t.”

“Close enough.”

I took the key. Not ownership. Not permission for anything beyond a moment. Just a key. It felt heavier than it should. Metal. Worn teeth. Small plastic head. Nothing special. Everything special. I put it in my pocket beside Ellen’s compass. Two objects. One pointed somewhere. One might eventually take us there. Maybe. Ray stood.

“Tomorrow.”

“Maybe.”

He smiled.

“You’re learning.”

I watched him walk toward the house. Then looked at Blaze.

“Don’t get excited.”

Tail. Katniss emerged from beneath the table. She walked to the Volkswagen. Jumped through the open door. Sat in the passenger seat. I looked at her.

“Definitely don’t get excited.”

She curled up. Blaze stood. Walked to the side door. Lay down. I took the key from my pocket. Held it beside the compass. The needle pointed north. The key pointed nowhere. Not yet. That felt right. Because sometimes knowing where you are doesn’t tell you where you’re going.

Sometimes the only thing you know is that a few parts have started moving again. And for now, that was enough.

CHAPTER 18

What Starts

Tom arrived with two coffees. One for himself. One for Ray. Nothing for me. I looked at him. He looked at me.

“You already have one.”

I checked my hand. Fair. Blaze was lying beside the Volkswagen. Katniss was inside it. Of course. The key was still in my pocket. So was Ellen’s compass. I had slept badly. Not because anything was wrong. Because today there was a chance the van might start. That was worse. Possibility is noisy. Tom set his toolbox down.

“Before anybody does anything stupid.”

Ray looked offended.

“I haven’t done anything.”

“That’s why I’m talking now.”

He pointed at me.

“You too.”

“I haven’t done anything either.”

“You’re holding the key.”

I looked at my hand. At some point, without noticing, I had taken it from my pocket.

“That’s concerning.”

Tom nodded.

“Exactly.”

We checked everything again. Fuel connections. Electrical. Battery. Engine bay. Nothing leaking. Nothing obviously loose. Nothing we had forgotten that would convert enthusiasm into regret. Tom made us wait. That may have been the hardest part. Ray walked around the van twice. Then a third time. Blaze followed him once. Katniss watched from the passenger seat. I stood near the driver’s door.

Tom finally looked at me.

“All right.”

I did not move. Ray looked at me.

“You heard him.”

“I did.”

“Well?”

I looked at the key. Then at Ray.

“You sure?”

He nodded.

“Yeah.”

Tom said, “He’s sure.” Ray looked at him.

“I can answer.”

“You were taking too long.”

I opened the driver’s door. The seat gave a tired squeak when I sat down. Old vinyl. Dust. Metal. The steering wheel was larger than I expected. The dash was simple. No glowing screen. No alerts. No little animated symbol telling me the vehicle was thinking about itself. Just switches. Gauges. Knobs. A steering wheel. A key. I liked it immediately.

That was unfortunate. Katniss was still on the passenger seat. I looked at her.

“You need to move.”

She did not.

“You absolutely need to move.”

Nothing. Ray leaned through the open door.

“She seems comfortable.”

“She can’t stay there.”

“Why?”

“Because I need to pay attention.”

“To the cat?”

“To the van.”

Katniss turned once. Curled up. I looked at Ray.

“Remove your cat.”

“Yours.”

“Ray.”

He reached in. Katniss allowed him to pick her up. Of course she did. Traitor. He carried her away. She looked over his arm at me the entire time. Blaze sat outside the driver’s door. Tail moving.

“Back.”

He backed up one step.

"More."

Another.

"Good."

Tom nodded.

"Dog listens better than Ray."

Ray said something unprintable. I wrote nothing down. Yet. I put the key in the ignition. The metal clicked into place. Nothing dramatic. It fit. Of course it fit. Still. There was something strange about the sound. A small mechanical certainty. The key belonged there. Whether I did was a different question.

"Don't crank it forever," Tom said.

"I know."

"If it doesn't catch, stop."

"I know."

"Listen for anything bad."

"I know."

"Smell for fuel."

"I know."

"Oil pressure if it starts."

"I know."

Ray looked at Tom.

"You going to let him turn it?"

Tom frowned.

"I'm supervising."

"You're narrating."

"Important distinction."

I put my hand on the key. Ray stood beside the open door. Tom at the rear. Blaze several feet away. Katniss had escaped Ray and was now on the picnic table. Everyone was watching. I hated that.

"Could you all look somewhere else?"

Nobody moved.

"Excellent."

I turned the key. The starter engaged. The engine rotated. Slowly. Rrrr-rrr-rrr. Then nothing. I released it. Silence. Nobody spoke. Tom listened. Ray looked at me. Blaze's ears lifted. Katniss washed her paw.

"Again," Tom said.

I waited several seconds. Turned the key. Rrrr-rrr-rrr. A cough. Tiny. Barely anything. But it was there. Ray's head snapped toward the rear. Tom held up one hand.

"Stop."

I released the key. Ray looked at him.

"It fired."

"Once."

"It fired."

"I heard it."

"You heard that?"

Tom looked at Ray.

"I am standing three feet from the engine."

"Just checking."

We waited. Tom checked the rear. Nothing leaking. Nothing alarming. He adjusted something. Came back around.

"Again."

I looked at Ray. He was smiling now. Trying not to. Failing badly. I turned the key. Rrrr-rrr- Cough. Cough.

Then: RUM-RUM-RUM-RUM-RUM. The entire Volkswagen shook. So did I. The engine stumbled. Caught. Stumbled again. Then stayed running. Barely. Rough. Uneven. Alive. Ray made a sound I had never heard from him before. Not a word. Not quite a laugh. Something halfway between surprise and memory. Tom shouted, "Oil pressure!" I looked at the gauge.

"Coming up!"

"Good."

"Voltage?"

"Good."

"Don't rev it."

"I wasn't."

"Just saying."

Blaze barked. The engine coughed. Blaze barked again.

"Blaze!"

He stopped. Tail going wild. Katniss jumped off the picnic table and disappeared beneath it. The van continued running. Rough. Loud. Smelling like every old machine that had ever awakened reluctantly. I kept both hands near the wheel. Not touching anything unnecessary.

Ray stood beside the door. Staring forward. Not at me. Not at the gauges. Through the windshield.

The engine smoothed slightly. Not much. Enough. Tom moved to the rear. Listened. Watched. Checked. He held up one finger.

"Thirty seconds."

Ray said, "That's all?"

"That's plenty."

"We just started it."

"Exactly."

"Let it run."

"No."

Ray frowned. Tom pointed.

"We don't know everything yet."

First rule. Don't make it worse. Ray hated it. He also understood. At thirty seconds, Tom waved. I turned the key back. The engine stopped. The silence afterward was enormous. For a moment, nobody moved. Then Ray put both hands on the roof. Head down. I looked away. Not because he was crying. I don't know if he was.

It wasn't mine to inspect. Tom closed the engine hatch halfway.

"Good."

Ray looked up.

"Good?"

"Very good."

"Sounded terrible."

"It hasn't run in nine years."

"Still."

"It started."

Ray smiled.

"Yeah."

Tom smiled too.

"Yeah."

Blaze approached cautiously. He sniffed the front tire. Then the open driver's door. Then me. His tail thumped against the body. Thunk. Thunk. I scratched his head.

"It started."

He licked my wrist.

"That is not the appropriate response."

Katniss emerged. Slowly. She walked around the van. Stopped at the rear. Looked toward the engine compartment. Then jumped onto the bumper.

"No."

She ignored me.

"Hot."

She ignored me. I stood up. She moved. Progress. Ray climbed into the driver's seat after I got out. He sat. Put his hands on the steering wheel. Didn't turn the key. Just sat. Tom looked at me. I looked at Tom. We walked away. Not far. Enough. I took out the camera. Then stopped. This wasn't automatically mine either.

Some moments were photographs. Some were not. Ray sat in the van his wife had once driven. His children had slept in. His dog had claimed. The vehicle he had kept because moving it forward felt too much like moving away. Now it had started again. I lowered the camera. No photograph. Not this one. Tom saw.

"Didn't take it?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Didn't belong to me."

He nodded. No joke. Rare. After a few minutes, Ray climbed out. He shut the door. Carefully.

"Again tomorrow."

Tom nodded.

"Maybe."

Ray glared. Tom smiled. We did not try to start it again that day. That became an argument. Ray wanted to. Tom said no. Ray asked why. Tom explained. Ray asked again. Tom explained using fewer words. Ray asked a third time. Tom packed his tools. That ended the discussion. Instead, we inspected. Of course. Starting had answered one question.

It had created seventeen more. There was a small oil seep. Not catastrophic. A fuel smell that required checking. Idle roughness. Electrical oddities. The horn remained disconnected. This was good because Blaze had developed opinions about it. Tom wanted the valves checked. Timing checked. Carburetion looked at. More things. Always more things. Ray looked at the list.

"I preferred it when it didn't run."

"No you didn't."

"No."

He smiled.

"I didn't."

By afternoon, the entire property seemed different. Nothing had moved. The Volkswagen remained exactly where it had been. But now we knew it could start. Potential changes scenery. I kept looking at it. Ray caught me.

"You're doing it."

"What?"

"Looking."

"I've always looked at it."

"Different now."

I didn't answer. He was right. Around two, Michael's truck came up the driveway. Evan with him. Laura arrived twenty minutes later. I looked at Ray.

"You called everybody."

"No."

Laura got out.

"Dad called everybody."

Ray shrugged.

"Seemed relevant."

Michael walked straight toward the van.

"It ran?"

Ray smiled.

"Thirty seconds."

Michael looked at Tom. Tom nodded.

"It ran."

Michael touched the roof. Just once. Then looked through the windshield. Evan said, "Can we hear it?" Everyone said, "No." He looked offended.

"Why?"

Tom pointed at the van.

"Because adults are trying something new."

"What's that?"

"Patience."

Evan nodded.

"Seems terrible."

Ray told the story. Not accurately. According to Ray, it started almost immediately. Tom corrected him. According to Ray, the engine sounded

strong. Tom corrected him. According to Ray, I looked terrified. That part may have been accurate. Michael laughed. Laura looked at me.

"You?"

"I was operating an unknown machine that hadn't run in nine years."

"Terrified."

"Appropriately cautious."

Ray nodded.

"Terrified."

Evan climbed into the driver's seat. With permission. He touched nothing. Good kid. He looked around.

"This is really basic."

Ray looked offended again.

"It's a vehicle."

"My car has more buttons on the steering wheel than this has on the whole dashboard."

"That's because your car doesn't trust you."

Evan looked at me.

"Is that true?"

"Absolutely."

Ray smiled. Katniss jumped through the open passenger door. She sat beside Evan. He looked at her.

"She likes the van."

Michael said, "Whose cat is that again?" Everyone looked at me. I hated all of them. Laura brought photographs. Not old ones. New prints. She handed one to Ray. It was the photograph I'd taken with the Temporary Home sign. Ray. Laura. Michael. Evan. Blaze. Katniss. The van. Ellen absent and present at the same time through the board she'd painted.

Ray looked at it. Long. Then handed it to Michael. Michael looked. Then Evan. Nobody said much. Good. Laura handed me another print. The photograph I'd taken the day before Michael arrived. Blaze beside the van. Katniss on the roof. Soft light. The one she had asked me to print for Ray.

"Made two."

I looked at it.

"You printed these?"

"Photo place in town."

I nodded.

"Thanks."

"That one's yours."

I looked at Ray.

"He was supposed to get it."

"He did."

She pointed. Ray had another copy. He was already studying it. I looked at mine. Interesting. On the camera screen, it had been good. On paper, it became something else. Permanent. Not actually permanent. Nothing was. But physical. A thing you could hold. The van in the photograph still hadn't started. Now the real one had. Time had already changed the picture.

That was one reason I liked photographs. They failed to keep up. Ray taped his copy to the workshop wall. Not framed. Not protected. Just tape. Laura looked horrified.

"Dad."

"What?"

"Don't tape it."

"It's fine."

"It'll curl."

"I'll flatten it."

"That's not how photographs work."

"It is now."

She took it down. Ray protested. She found a frame. Of course there was a frame. Ray had everything. Eventually. She put the photograph inside. Hung it on the wall. Ray stared.

"Better?"

"Fine."

Laura smiled. Michael looked at the old VW service manual.

"What's next?"

Tom answered.

"Everything."

"Helpful."

"Tomorrow we check valves, timing, fuel system again, then maybe another controlled start."

"Maybe."

Ray groaned. Tom looked delighted. The family stayed for dinner. So did Tom. This was apparently happening now. Ray's quiet property had become a place where people arrived. I noticed that too. A week ago

it had been Ray. Mostly. Then me. Then Blaze. Then Katniss. Then Tom. Laura. Michael. Evan. Things were moving. Not only the van.

We ate outside. Michael brought hamburgers. Blaze spent the entire meal conducting psychological warfare. He sat. He looked at Michael. He looked away. He looked back. He sighed. Michael lasted six minutes. I pointed at him.

"No."

"I didn't do anything."

"You were about to."

"No."

Blaze placed one paw on Michael's boot. Michael looked at me.

"That's unfair."

"He's experienced."

Katniss meowed from beneath Laura's chair. Laura said, "We're surrounded."

"Do not negotiate with them."

Ray gave Katniss a tiny piece of plain meat. I stared at him.

"What?"

"She asked."

"We've discussed this."

"And reached no agreement."

After dinner, Evan wandered around taking photographs. Phone. Everything. Rusty bolts. Tools. Blaze. Katniss. Ray. Michael. The workshop. He photographed a spiderweb in the fence. Then an oil stain. Then a bent screwdriver. I watched.

"Why that?"

He looked at the screwdriver.

"Looks interesting."

"Good answer."

He looked at my camera.

"Why do you use that instead of a phone?"

"Different reasons."

"Better pictures?"

"Sometimes."

"What other reasons?"

I thought.

"It makes me slow down."

Evan looked at the camera.

"Phones can do that."

"Yes."

He held his up.

"Then maybe it's not the camera."

I smiled.

"That's annoyingly good."

Michael called from the table.

"Runs in the family."

Evan asked if he could use my camera. I showed him. Basic controls. Nothing complicated. Then handed it over. He immediately photographed Blaze. Of course. Blaze posed. Traitor. Then Katniss. She turned away. Consistent. Evan walked toward the Volkswagen. Ray and Michael were standing beside it. Talking. Laura nearby. Tom packing tools. Evan raised the camera. I almost told him to wait.

Didn't. He took the photograph. Then another. He looked at the screen.

"Want to see?"

I did. Ray and Michael were in profile. Not looking at the camera. Ray talking with one hand on the van. Michael listening. Laura in the background. The Volkswagen between generations. It was good. Very good. Not technically perfect. Didn't matter.

"Keep that one."

Evan smiled.

"Really?"

"Definitely."

He handed the camera back. I checked the image again. My camera. His photograph. Ray's van. Ellen's history. Michael's memory. Laura's family. Blaze asleep just outside the frame. Katniss probably somewhere she shouldn't be. Ownership became slippery when enough people cared about something. Maybe that was healthy. The next morning was quieter. Michael and Evan had gone home.

Laura too. Tom arrived late. Ray pretended not to be waiting. He had been outside since seven. Tom arrived at nine-thirty. Ray looked at his watch.

"Morning."

Tom said, "Beautiful day." Ray stared.

"Morning."

"Did you sleep?"

"No."

"Good."

We worked through the checks. Valves. Timing. Fuel. Electrical. Nothing rushed. Tom found one adjustment he didn't like. Fixed it. Another connection. Cleaned it. We checked the oil seep. Small. Manageable for now. Tom finally wiped his hands.

"Okay."

Ray looked at him.

"Okay what?"

"Start it."

Ray looked at me. I looked at Ray. He pointed toward the driver's seat.

"Your turn."

Again. This time Katniss wasn't inside. Blaze stayed back without being told twice. Progress everywhere. I sat. Key in. Turn. The engine cranked. Caught. Faster this time. RUM-RUM-RUM-RUM. Rough. Then smoother. Tom watched. Ray listened. I watched gauges. Thirty seconds. A minute. Tom let it run. Two minutes. Three. The idle settled. Not perfect. Alive.

Ray stood beside the driver's window. He didn't say anything. Then Tom yelled from the rear.

"Give it a little throttle."

I looked at him.

"Little?"

"Little."

I pressed gently. The engine rose. Not dramatically. Just enough. The Volkswagen vibrated differently. Awake. Really awake. I released. Idle returned. Tom listened. Then smiled.

"That's better."

Ray slapped the side of the van.

"Hey!"

Everyone looked at him. He looked embarrassed.

"Sorry."

I laughed. Five minutes. Tom waved. I shut it down. Silence. This time the silence didn't feel huge. It felt temporary. Ray opened the driver's door.

"Tomorrow."

Tom said, "Maybe." Ray looked at him.

"You're enjoying this too much."

"Absolutely."

Later, Ray and I sat on the rear bumper. Blaze beneath the shade. Katniss on the roof. Of course. Ray looked toward the trees.

"Been thinking."

"Dangerous."

"Yeah."

He ignored me.

"If it drives..."

I waited.

"If."

"Right."

"I don't want it staying here."

There it was. I didn't move. Ray continued.

"Not after all this."

"You could use it."

He laughed.

"For what?"

"Travel."

"I'm seventy-one."

"That isn't an answer."

"It is when my knees are involved."

Fair. He looked at the ground.

"Ellen wanted it moving."

"You think."

"I know."

I waited. Then Ray said, "Michael's okay with it." I looked at him.

"Okay with what?"

"He'll pretend he's not."

"Ray."

"Laura's okay."

"With what?"

He looked at me.

"You know."

"I want you to say it."

"Why?"

"Because it's your van."

He looked toward the Volkswagen. Katniss was walking along the roof rack. Blaze was asleep below. Then back at me.

"When it's safe."

I waited.

"When Tom says it's roadworthy."

Longer.

"I want you to take it."

No joke. No maybe. No *for now.* Just words. I looked at him.

"Ray."

"No."

"You don't know what I was going to say."

"Yes I do."

"You don't."

"You were going to make it complicated."

I considered.

"Probably."

"Don't."

I looked at the van. Then him.

"I can't just take it."

"Why not?"

"Because it's worth something."

"So?"

"So we need to figure out a fair price."

"No."

"Ray."

"No."

"Then work."

"You've been working."

"Not enough for a Volkswagen."

"Depends on the Volkswagen."

I looked at it.

"That one now runs."

"Barely."

"That strengthens my argument."

Ray shook his head.

"I don't want your money."

“Then I don’t take it.”

He stared at me. I stared back. We were both very good at this. Unfortunately. Finally he said, “You want fair?”

“Yes.”

“Fine.”

He pointed toward the property.

“Finish the fence.”

“Already did.”

“Back section.”

“That’s blackmail.”

“Clean the workshop.”

“Impossible.”

“Organize it.”

“More impossible.”

“Help me clear the drainage ditch before winter.”

“That’s actual work.”

“Exactly.”

I waited. Ray continued.

“You help with the van until it’s done. You help around here while you’re staying. When it runs safely, you take it.”

“That’s still not equal value.”

“I don’t care.”

“I do.”

“Then come back someday and help again.”

That stopped me. Ray looked at me.

“You’re a traveler.”

“Yes.”

“So travel.”

He shrugged.

“Come back.”

Simple. I looked at the van again. Not a sale. Not exactly a gift either. Something stranger. A continuing arrangement. Maybe that fit better.

“What about Michael?”

“Talked to him last night.”

“And?”

“He said you’re annoying.”

“That’s not relevant.”

“Said you listen too much.”

“Also not relevant.”

“Said if you’re going to have it, don’t turn it into a food truck.”

I smiled.

“Reasonable.”

“Laura said the curtains stay safe.”

“Definitely.”

“Both want copies of whatever photographs you take with it.”

That one surprised me.

“All of them?”

Ray laughed.

“No. Good ones.”

“That’s more manageable.”

He looked at me.

“Deal?”

I reached out. Then stopped.

“One condition.”

Ray groaned.

“Of course.”

“The exterior stays as it is for now.”

He looked confused.

“That was my condition.”

“Then we agree.”

“No repainting.”

“No.”

“No sanding everything down because somebody thinks rust needs to disappear.”

“No.”

“Fix what needs fixing.”

“Preserve what doesn’t.”

Ray nodded. There it was. I held out my hand. He shook it. No ceremony. No paperwork yet. We’d handle that. Title. Registration. Whatever legal steps came next. Real things. Necessary things. But the decision had happened. Quietly. On a rear bumper. With a dog asleep nearby and a cat above us. Ray released my hand.

“Still mine until it’s safe.”

"Agreed."

"And titled."

"Absolutely."

"And you don't name it something stupid."

I looked at him.

"I haven't named it anything."

"Good."

He walked away. I watched him go. Then looked at the van. Unnamed. Still. That felt right. Blaze woke. He walked over. Stood beside me. I put one hand on his head.

"Well."

Tail.

"Apparently we own nothing yet."

Tail.

"But eventually..."

His tail accelerated.

"Don't."

Too late. Katniss jumped down from the roof. Onto the hood. Then the ground. Then straight through the open side door. I watched her.

"No."

She disappeared inside.

"Definitely no."

Blaze looked at me.

"She's not part of the deal."

Nothing. I went to the door. Katniss was sitting on the bench. Looking out. The interior was still mostly empty. No curtains. No bedding. No supplies. No shelves stocked. No home. Not yet. I took Ellen's compass out. Opened it. North. Then the key. I held both. One had belonged to Ellen. One had belonged to Ray. Soon, maybe, one would belong to me.

That thought felt too large. So I put them away. That evening I walked. Alone. Mostly. Blaze came. So not alone. Katniss followed for half a mile. So definitely not alone. At the fork outside town, I stopped. One road continued toward the hills. Another curved back toward Ray's property. Blaze looked up. Katniss sat in the middle of the path.

I didn't need the compass. I knew exactly where I was. I also knew where I was going. Back. For now. That surprised me more than anything the Volkswagen had done. We returned near sunset. The van sat where it always had. Ray was inside his house. Workshop dark. Everything quiet. I stopped at the driveway. Blaze beside me.

Katniss walked ahead. Straight toward the van. Of course. I took out the camera. The light was low. Soft. The Volkswagen sat beneath the trees. No people. No tools. No open engine compartment. No one working. Just the old camper. Blaze entered the edge of the frame. Katniss stopped near the side door. I waited. The last sunlight touched the roof.

Click. I checked it. Simple. Quiet. The van still looked abandoned. Except it wasn't. Not anymore. Keeper. I lowered the camera. Blaze walked toward the campsite. Katniss followed. I stayed another moment. The engine had started. That was the obvious thing. But something else had started too. Ray had begun letting go. His family had begun coming back.

Blaze had begun becoming a traveler instead of a shelter dog. Katniss had begun becoming something that was definitely not mine. And I had begun staying long enough to discover that leaving wasn't the only way a journey could continue. I looked at the Volkswagen.

"Don't get excited."

The van did not respond. Good. At least one of us was listening.

CHAPTER 19

The First Mile

The Volkswagen was not roadworthy. This became important because everyone had started looking at it as though it were. Starting had changed expectations. Yesterday it had been an old camper that happened to contain an engine. Today it was a vehicle. Technically. Tom disagreed.

"It's a machine that can make noise."

Ray frowned.

"It runs."

"So does a chainsaw."

"You can't drive a chainsaw."

Tom looked at him.

"Not with that attitude."

I set down my coffee.

"I'd like to formally withdraw from this conversation."

The tires arrived that morning. Four of them. New. Black. Round. Remarkably free of cracks. I had forgotten tires could look that healthy. Ray stood beside the old ones. Then the new ones. He nudged one of the old tires with his boot.

"Still had tread."

Tom stared at him.

"So does a fossil."

"That's not how fossils work."

"That's not how tires work either."

I looked at Blaze.

"You see what I deal with?"

Blaze wagged. He had been fascinated by the new tires since they arrived. Not because they were tires. Because they smelled new. Blaze considered smell sufficient justification for most investigations. Katniss

considered the stack of tires furniture. She was sitting inside the top one. Only her head visible. Ray pointed at her.

"Your cat's in the tire."

"Not my tire."

Tom looked at me.

"Interesting defense."

We didn't mount anything ourselves. Not because we couldn't physically put wheels on a vehicle. Because there were things that deserved people with proper equipment. The tire shop sent a truck and took the wheels. Ray watched them leave. He looked unsettled.

"What's wrong?"

"Van's never been on blocks this long."

I looked at the wheel wells.

"Nine years sitting didn't bother you?"

"Had wheels."

"Interesting standard."

"Looked complete."

That made more sense than it should have. While the wheels were gone, Tom finished the brake inspection. Again. He had become increasingly obsessed with the word **again**. Check it. Check it again. Bleed it. Check it again. Start it. Shut it down. Check it again. I approved. Ray tolerated. Barely. The fuel smell from Chapter Eighteen had a cause.

A small one. A connection we had disturbed during the work. Nothing dramatic. Nothing cinematic. Exactly the sort of problem that would have become dramatic if ignored. Tom fixed it. Then made us wait. Ray hated waiting. I had discovered this about him. He could leave a Volkswagen untouched for nine years. But once a repair began, ten minutes became unreasonable.

"Can we start it now?"

"No."

Five minutes.

"Now?"

"No."

Another five.

"Tom."

"No."

Ray looked at me.

"He's enjoying this."

“He absolutely is.”

Tom smiled. When the wheels returned, the van changed again. It was subtle. Same faded paint. Same rust. Same slightly defeated expression. But the new tires made it look less abandoned. Not restored. I didn’t want restored. Not like that. Ready was different. Or beginning to be. Katniss walked around the first new tire. Sniffed it. Rubbed her face against it.

Then sneezed. I smiled.

“Strong endorsement.”

She walked away. Blaze sniffed the same tire. Sneezed. Then sniffed it again.

“Different learning styles.”

Tom torqued the wheels. Then checked them. Then made me check them. Then checked my checking. Ray leaned against the workshop.

“You trust anybody?”

“No.”

“Healthy.”

“Kept me alive.”

“You’re seventy-three.”

“Exactly.”

Ray looked at me.

“He says that like it’s proof.”

“It technically is.”

By noon, the Volkswagen sat on four new tires. Brakes assembled. Fuel system improved. Battery connected. Horn repaired. Mostly. Tom had tested it once. Blaze had barked. The horn had answered. Blaze barked again. We stopped that experiment. Some relationships needed boundaries. The next question was movement. Not driving. Movement. Tom wanted the clutch checked. Transmission behavior. Brake pedal feel.

Steering. Parking brake. Everything that could be evaluated before leaving the property. Ray looked at me.

“You driving?”

“Your van.”

He sighed.

“We’ve discussed this.”

“Still your van.”

“Temporarily.”

That word was becoming dangerous. I sat in the driver's seat. Katniss immediately jumped onto the passenger seat.

"No."

She looked forward.

"No."

Ray leaned through the window.

"She knows where she's going."

"I need the seat."

"For what?"

"A passenger."

"Nobody's riding yet."

"Still."

Katniss curled up. I looked at Ray.

"Do something."

He scratched her head.

"Good luck."

Traitor. I lifted her. She allowed it. This had become easier. Not because she had accepted my authority. Because she had apparently decided being carried short distances was beneath the effort required to object. I set her outside. She looked at me. Then jumped onto the hood.

"Fine."

Tom stood at the rear. Ray outside my window. Blaze behind a closed gate with Laura. Laura had arrived around eleven. I had stopped asking why Ray's family kept appearing. Apparently the property had developed gravity. Michael was working. Evan had school. Laura had brought lunch. And a folding chair. That suggested she had no intention of leaving quickly.

"Neutral," Tom called.

I checked.

"Neutral."

"Clutch."

I pressed. The pedal felt strange. Not bad. Just old. Mechanical. Direct.

"Feels okay."

"That's not a measurement."

"Feels like a clutch."

"Better."

I turned the key. The engine cranked. Caught. Rough for a few seconds. Then settled. Still not smooth. Better than yesterday. Ray smiled.

He tried not to. Didn't work. I pressed the clutch. Selected first. Slowly. Nothing protested. Tom leaned near the rear.

"Clutch out gently."

"I know."

"Just saying."

"You're narrating again."

"Important distinction."

I began releasing the clutch. The van shuddered. The engine dipped. I pressed again. Ray laughed. I looked at him.

"Would you like to do this?"

"No."

"Then silence."

Laura laughed from the gate. Second attempt. More throttle. Less hesitation. The clutch engaged. The Volkswagen moved. Six inches. Maybe eight. Everyone froze. I pressed the clutch and brake. Stopped. The engine continued running. Ray stared at the ground. At the tire. At the space where the tire had been.

"It moved."

Tom looked at him.

"That's typically what vehicles do."

Ray ignored him.

"It moved."

Blaze barked from behind the gate. Katniss jumped from the hood. She had apparently discovered that her furniture could move. Her expression was magnificent. I wished I had a camera pointed at her.

"Again," Tom said.

I eased forward. This time several feet. Then stopped. Reverse. Slow. Back to where we'd started. Brakes worked. Clutch worked. Transmission entered gear. Steering moved. Nothing fell off. This represented a successful afternoon by our standards. Ray came to the door.

"Again."

Tom said, "No." Ray turned.

"We went twelve feet."

"And learned what we needed."

"We learned it moves."

"Correct."

"So move it more."

"Tomorrow."

Ray looked personally betrayed. Laura walked over.

"I think Tom's right."

Ray stared at her.

"I raised you better."

"No, you didn't."

"Fair."

We shut the Volkswagen down. Ray spent several minutes walking around it. Again. I watched. Laura joined me.

"He did this when Mom was alive."

"What?"

"Checked the van every time they stopped."

"For problems?"

"Probably."

She smiled.

"But also just looked at it."

I understood that. She handed me a paper bag.

"Sandwich."

"Thank you."

"Turkey."

Blaze's head appeared between the fence rails. His nose lifted. I looked at him.

"No."

The nose remained.

"No."

One paw appeared. Laura laughed.

"He's terrifyingly good at that."

"Do not encourage him."

We ate at the picnic table. Katniss returned. Naturally. Ray sat beside me. Tom across. Laura at the end. Blaze was released after the van cooled and immediately conducted a complete forensic investigation of the tire tracks. Two short black marks. That's all. He sniffed them as though we had crossed a continent. Ray watched him.

"He'll fit."

I looked at him.

"In what?"

"The van."

"Yes."

“Plenty of room.”

“Once the interior goes back together.”

“Still room.”

“For Blaze.”

“Yep.”

Ray looked toward Katniss. She was beneath the table. I followed his eyes.

“No.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You thought something.”

“Can’t prove that.”

The interior became the afternoon’s project. Not restoration. Planning. We had removed ruined upholstery. Cleaned cabinets. Saved what could be saved. Now we needed to decide what the van actually needed to become. That was new territory. Before, every decision had been about making it function. Now some decisions were about how it would be used. That felt considerably more personal.

Ray opened the side door.

“Bed.”

“Yes.”

“Storage underneath.”

“Definitely.”

“Water.”

“A lot.”

“Food.”

“For me and Blaze.”

“Books.”

I looked at him.

“Some.”

Ray laughed.

“You said that about your backpack.”

“This is different.”

“How?”

“It has an engine.”

“That’s not a bookshelf.”

“Could be.”

Laura stepped inside.

"What about the cat?"

"No."

She turned.

"What?"

"The van does not require cat accommodations."

Katniss jumped into the van behind her. Laura looked down. Then at me.

"Seems late for that decision."

I ignored both of them. Blaze needed a safe place to ride. That mattered. A hundred seventeen pounds of dog could not simply become a loose projectile every time we stopped suddenly. We discussed restraint options. Placement. Ventilation. Access to water. Enough room to lie comfortably. Nothing permanent decided yet. But it went on the list.

Laura wrote: **BLAZE SEATBELT** I looked at it.

"Not exactly."

"Everybody understands it."

Ray added beneath it: **CAT?** I crossed it out. Laura rewrote it. I crossed it out again. Ray rewrote it. I put the pencil down.

"I work with children."

Laura smiled. Water storage mattered more. Food storage. A place for camera equipment that stayed dry. Books. Basic tools. Emergency supplies. First aid for both people and animals. Maps. Clothes. Cooking equipment. Blaze's food alone occupied an unreasonable amount of imaginary space. I looked at the cabinets.

"That's why I needed this."

Ray heard me. Not *wanted.* Needed. I noticed the difference. So did he, I think. He said nothing. We measured. Made sketches. Argued about shelves. Ray wanted one cabinet exactly as it had been. I agreed. Laura wanted another converted to easier storage. Ray objected. She reminded him her mother had hated that cabinet. Ray denied this. Laura produced a photograph of Ellen pointing angrily into it.

I stared.

"You have photographic evidence?"

"I came prepared."

Ray looked betrayed. The photograph was excellent. Not artistically. Ellen stood inside the van. One hand on her hip. One finger pointing toward a cabinet. Her mouth open mid-complaint. Ray was visible in a tiny mirror behind her. Smiling. I laughed.

“What was wrong with it?”

Laura said, “Door kept opening while driving.” Ray said, “Only on turns.”

“That’s when doors matter.”

I wrote: **Fix cabinet latch.** Ray sighed. The Temporary Home sign remained inside Ray’s house. Nobody suggested putting it back. I liked that. It belonged to the van’s history. It didn’t need to become its future decoration. The same was true of Ellen’s curtains. We could preserve a thing without recreating everything around it. That idea kept returning.

That evening Tom left early. Which meant six. He stood beside the van.

“Tomorrow, longer movement test.”

Ray smiled.

“Road?”

“No.”

Smile vanished.

“Driveway.”

“That’s not a road.”

“Correct.”

“Then what’s the point?”

“Brakes.”

“They work.”

“You tested them at walking speed for twelve feet.”

“Technically.”

Tom pointed at him.

“This is why I don’t trust you.”

The next morning, rain arrived. Not heavy. Steady. Enough to cancel the test. Ray stood under the workshop roof staring at the sky.

“This is ridiculous.”

“It’s rain.”

“I know what it is.”

“Good.”

“We can drive in rain.”

“Eventually.”

“The van has windshield wipers.”

Tom looked at him.

“Do they work?”

Ray became quiet. We all looked at the Volkswagen. Nobody knew. That became the morning. Wipers. One worked. The other attempted to. Then stopped in the center of the windshield. I sat behind the wheel watching it.

“That’s expressive.”

Ray stood outside.

“Needs adjustment.”

Tom said, “Needs parts.” Ray glared. We fixed what we could. Ordered what we couldn’t. Again. Old vehicles are optimistic machines. Tom had been right. Every repaired part assumed you were willing to repair the next. The rain continued. Blaze liked this.

He stood outside until his coat was wet enough to contain its own weather system. Then came under the workshop roof. Shook. Everyone yelled simultaneously. Water everywhere. Blaze looked delighted.

“Outside.”

He went outside. Still delighted. Katniss watched from a dry shelf. Her expression suggested dogs were a design flaw. The rain made photography possible. That was something. I took the camera. Walked to the edge of the property. Blaze came. Of course. Katniss remained dry. Of course. The Volkswagen sat beyond the fence. Wet paint darker. Rust nearly black.

Drops collecting on the windows. New tires shiny against mud. Not beautiful. Or maybe exactly beautiful. Different kind. I waited. The rain softened. A patch of brighter sky opened behind the trees. Not sunlight. Just light. Enough to reflect across the van’s wet side. I framed it. The workshop at one edge. Van centered slightly wrong on purpose.

Tire tracks from yesterday leading nowhere. Click. I checked. Keeper. Then Blaze walked into the frame. He stopped beside the van. Looked toward me. Wet. Huge. Miserable-looking despite having deliberately chosen to stand in rain. I photographed him. He sneezed. Second photograph. Better. Keeper. Back under the roof, Laura arrived again. Rain jacket. Coffee carrier. Ray stared.

“Do you live here now?”

“Apparently.”

She handed him coffee. He stopped objecting. She looked at my camera.

“Get anything?”

I showed her the van. Then Blaze. She laughed at Blaze.

“He looks betrayed.”

“He walked into the rain voluntarily.”

"Still."

Blaze leaned against her wet jeans. She scratched his head. He was over the betrayal. We spent the afternoon in Ray's workshop. Not cleaning. Organizing. Part of my side of the bargain. Ray had agreed to this. In theory. In practice, every object I moved had historical significance. I picked up a coffee can full of bolts.

"Keep?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what they're for?"

"Bolts."

"Excellent."

I put them in a labeled bin. Ray looked offended.

"What?"

"You labeled them."

"Yes."

"I knew what they were."

"Future generations deserve a chance."

There were seventeen coffee cans. Bolts. Nuts. Washers. Electrical bits. Mysteries. One contained keys. No labels. Dozens. I held it up.

"Ray."

"Keys."

"To what?"

He shrugged.

"Things."

"Things you own?"

"Mostly."

"Do any of those things still exist?"

"Probably."

Laura looked into the can.

"Mom tried to throw those out."

"Your mother was reckless."

"She was right."

"Impossible."

I sorted keys. Not by what they opened. Nobody knew. By shape. Size. Type. At least chaos could be categorized. Near the bottom of one drawer, I found a keychain. Old. Leather. Cracked. Stamped with a faded compass rose. I held it up. Ray stopped.

"That was the van's."

I looked at him.

"The keychain?"

"Yeah."

"Where's the key?"

He pointed at my pocket. I took out the Volkswagen key. Plain plastic head. Separate ring. Somewhere over the years it had been removed from the old leather keychain. Ray took the leather piece. Turned it over.

"Ellen bought this."

Laura looked.

"I remember that."

Ray smiled.

"She said I'd lose the keys less if the keychain was bigger."

"Did it work?"

"No."

Laura nodded.

"That tracks."

Ray handed it to me. I didn't take it. He frowned.

"Again?"

"You don't need to give me every object associated with the van."

"I'm not."

"Compass."

"Different."

"Keychain."

"Useful."

"It barely holds together."

"Then fix it."

I looked at the cracked leather.

"It's old."

"So's the van."

That wasn't a compelling argument. Unfortunately, it worked. I took it. Later, I cleaned it gently. Nothing dramatic. Didn't make it new. Conditioned the leather. Reinforced the weak ring. Put the van key onto it. The old compass rose was barely visible. Still there. That seemed right. By the following morning, the weather cleared. Tom arrived before Ray could complain.

"Driveway."

Ray smiled.

“Road.”

“Driveway.”

“Long driveway.”

“Still.”

This time I sat in the driver’s seat. Ray sat passenger. That decision happened without discussion. Katniss was not pleased. She sat outside the open door staring at Ray as though he had stolen something. Blaze remained with Laura behind the fence. No animals inside yet. Not until we had proper restraint and knew more. Ray buckled his seat belt.

Old belt. Functional. We had checked. Everything checked. Always. Tom stood outside.

“Walking speed.”

“I know.”

“Brake before the gate.”

“I know.”

“Clutch feels wrong, stop.”

“I know.”

“Anything sounds bad...”

“Stop.”

Tom nodded.

“You’re learning.”

Ray looked at me.

“He likes you better.”

“No.”

Tom heard.

“Yes.”

Engine started. Quicker now. Idle settled. I put it in first. Released clutch. The Volkswagen moved. This time nobody gasped. Progress. Ten feet. Twenty. Thirty. The steering had play. Not terrifying. Noticeable. I said it. Tom walked beside us.

“Yep.”

Brakes. Good. Again. Good. We continued. Walking pace. The driveway felt absurdly long. Ray sat very still. Hands on his knees. Looking through the windshield. Trees moved past. Slowly. That mattered. For nine years, the view through that windshield hadn’t moved. Now it did. Halfway down the driveway, Ray laughed. Quiet. I looked over.

“What?”

"Nothing."

"That's clearly something."

He shook his head.

"Forgot how loud it was."

The engine rattled behind us. Cabinet somewhere vibrated. Door seal whistled. I smiled.

"Very peaceful."

"Ellen loved this thing."

"Why?"

"Nobody knows."

We reached the gate. Stopped. Clean. No drama. Tom caught up. Checked underneath. Looked around.

"Reverse."

Ray looked disappointed.

"That's it?"

"Today."

"We're thirty yards from the road."

"Correct."

"Could practically see it."

"Excellent vision."

I reversed. Slowly. The Volkswagen returned toward the workshop. Ray twisted around to look behind us.

"Mirror's terrible."

"I noticed."

"Always was."

"That goes on the list."

"No."

"Why?"

"Tradition."

I stared at him.

"We are replacing unsafe tradition."

"Fine."

We stopped near the workshop. Engine off. Tom checked everything. Again. No leaks. Brakes cool enough. Nothing alarming. Steering needed attention. Mirror. Wipers. A few other things. But the Volkswagen had

moved under its own power. Forward. Backward. Stopped where intended. No pieces remained in the driveway. Success. Laura opened the gate. Blaze charged toward us. Not uncontrolled.

Technically. He stopped when I asked. Eventually. Then investigated the entire van. Katniss walked directly past everyone. Jumped into the passenger seat the moment Ray opened the door. I pointed.

"See?"

Ray laughed.

"She waited."

"She was waiting for the seat."

"Smart."

I sat on the driver's step. Blaze beside me. Katniss in Ray's former seat. Ray standing outside. Tom under the rear again. Laura taking a picture with her phone. I looked down the driveway. The road visible beyond the gate. Thirty yards away. Maybe less. For weeks, roads had meant movement. I saw one, I followed it. Simple.

Now I was sitting in something that might eventually let us travel much farther. And I wasn't impatient. That surprised me. Ray sat beside me.

"Tomorrow?"

I smiled.

"Maybe."

He stared.

"Don't."

I laughed. The afternoon was ordinary. Fence work. Drainage ditch. Another cabinet latch. Blaze training. Katniss disappearing for several hours and returning as though she had never left. No dramatic event. No decision. I liked that. Sometimes a first mile begins long before the odometer changes. That evening, I walked toward town. Blaze with me. Katniss followed to the driveway.

Stopped. I looked back. She sat.

"Staying?"

She washed a paw.

"Your choice."

I continued. This time she did not follow. That felt important too. She could leave. She could stay. She was doing both. Exactly as she wanted. Blaze and I reached the little rise where the road curved. I could see part of Ray's property from there. Workshop roof. Trees. The faint pale shape of the Volkswagen. Small from this distance.

I took out the camera. Then lowered it. Too far. Wrong light. Not everything needed a photograph. We continued into town. Martha was outside the library locking the door. She saw us.

"Ray's traveler."

"Apparently."

She looked at Blaze.

"Still hasn't eaten the flowers."

"He considers that an unresolved negotiation."

She nodded toward the road behind me.

"You've been staying awhile."

"I have."

"Unusual?"

"For me."

"Bad?"

I thought.

"No."

She smiled.

"Then maybe unusual isn't the same thing as bad."

I looked at her.

"Do you keep these prepared?"

"Library."

"Right."

She asked about the Volkswagen. Small town. Of course she knew.

"It started."

Her eyebrows rose.

"Ray's camper?"

"Yes."

"Well."

She looked genuinely pleased.

"I haven't seen that on the road in years."

"Still haven't."

"Planning to?"

"Eventually."

She nodded.

"Good."

Then she looked at Blaze.

"And the cat?"

I stared.

"How do you know about the cat?"

"Small town."

I sighed. We walked back near dusk. Katniss was waiting at Ray's driveway. Sitting in the center. Blaze saw her first. Tail. She stood. Walked toward us. Not running. Not dramatic. Just meeting us. I stopped. She rubbed against Blaze. Then me. Then turned and walked back toward camp. I watched her.

"That's becoming suspicious."

Blaze followed. Ray had left the van's side door open. Interior light glowing. Katniss jumped inside. Blaze stopped at the doorway. Looked at me. He had climbed partly in before. But this time he waited. Interesting. I walked over.

"Up."

Blaze put his front paws inside. Stopped. The step was high. The interior unfamiliar. I gave him time. No pulling. No pushing. He sniffed. Katniss sat on the bench. Watching. Blaze lifted one rear leg. Changed his mind. Stepped down.

"Fine."

Tail.

"Try later."

Ray appeared from the house.

"Didn't get in?"

"No."

"He will."

"Probably."

"You could lift him."

I looked at Ray.

"One hundred seventeen pounds."

"You're a skeleton."

"Exactly."

Ray brought out a scrap of old carpet. We placed it over the threshold for traction. Blaze investigated. One paw. Two. Pause. Then climbed in. All the way. He stood inside the Volkswagen. Huge. Larger than expected. I looked around.

"So much for spacious."

Ray laughed. Blaze turned once. Knocked his tail against a cabinet. Thunk. Katniss jumped onto the counter. Blaze sat. His head nearly level with the window. He looked outside. Then at me. Tail. Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. I stepped inside. Not much room with both of us. Yet. Still unfinished. Katniss jumped down. Walked past Blaze. Curled on the bench.

Blaze lay on the floor. He barely fit without blocking half the aisle. Ray stood outside.

"Need to rethink storage."

"Yes."

"Cat shelf."

"No."

"Blaze bed."

"Definitely."

"Books."

"Some."

Ray smiled. I sat on the step. Blaze inside. Katniss above him. Ray outside. The old camper smelled like cleaner, dust, metal, new rubber, and the faint remains of years. I took the key from my pocket. Now attached to Ellen's old compass-rose keychain. Ray noticed.

"Looks right."

"Still cracked."

"So are you."

I looked at him.

"That's unnecessarily personal."

He laughed. I turned the keychain over in my hand. The compass rose had no needle. Just directions stamped into leather. North. South. East. West. No indication which one we should take. Good. I already had one compass for that. And even that could only tell direction. Not destination. Ray leaned against the doorway.

"Road tomorrow."

I looked at him.

"Tom said?"

"Tom said maybe."

"Then maybe."

Ray groaned. Blaze put his head on my knee. Katniss closed her eyes. The Volkswagen remained parked. Still unnamed. Still Ray's on paper. Still unfinished. But for the first time, all three of us were inside it together. I noticed that. Ray did too. He smiled. Didn't say anything. Neither did I. Some moments didn't improve when explained.

Outside, the driveway stretched toward the road. Beyond that, town. Beyond town, more roads. Trails. Mountains. Deserts. Coasts. Places I knew. Places I didn't. The temptation to imagine all of it was enormous. So I didn't. Not yet. There was still work to do here. A steering issue. A mirror. Wipers. Storage. Paperwork. Blaze's travel setup. A cat who had not been invited to anything.

And tomorrow, perhaps, the first road test. One thing at a time. That had become another rule. Maybe the most important one. I scratched Blaze behind the ear. Katniss opened one eye. I scratched hers too.

"Don't interpret this."

Purr. Too late. I looked through the windshield. At the darkening driveway. The first mile was still ahead of us. But for once, being almost ready felt like enough.

CHAPTER 20

The Road Beyond the Gate

The first road test was scheduled for nine. This meant Ray was outside at seven-thirty. Tom arrived at eight-forty. I arrived at the Volkswagen at eight-forty-two. Ray had already checked the tires. Twice. He was checking them again.

"You know they're still round," I said.

"Can't be too careful."

Tom walked up behind him.

"You absolutely can."

Ray ignored him. Blaze was lying near the workshop. Katniss sat on the hood. I looked at her.

"We've discussed this."

She looked at me.

"Repeatedly."

Nothing. Tom pointed.

"Your cat's on the van."

"You're late."

"Forty minutes early."

"Still."

The rain had cleared overnight. The driveway was damp. The road beyond the gate was darker where the pavement still held moisture. Everything smelled washed. Trees. Dirt. Grass. Old wood. Even the Volkswagen smelled slightly less like machinery and slightly more like possibility. That was dangerous. Tom walked around it. Again. He checked the steering work we'd done.

Mirror. Wipers. Brakes. Lights. Turn signals. One turn signal worked reluctantly. The other worked enthusiastically enough to suggest compensation. Tom frowned.

"Left one's slow."

Ray said, "Still blinking."

“Not the standard.”

“It’s signaling.”

“So is smoke.”

I looked at Ray.

“He’s got you there.”

“No.”

We fixed the signal. Small connection. Corrosion. Cleaned it. Tested again. Blink. Blink. Blink. Tom nodded.

“Better.”

Ray looked toward the road.

“Now?”

Tom looked at him.

“Now.”

Ray smiled. That was the first mistake. The second mistake was assuming Katniss would stay out of the van. She jumped through the open passenger door before Ray could sit down. I pointed.

“No.”

Ray pointed at me.

“Your problem.”

“Your seat.”

“Exactly.”

Katniss curled up. Ray looked at her. Then at me.

“You’re driving.”

“Yes.”

“So technically she can ride with me.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re not taking animals on the road test until we know the van behaves.”

Katniss opened one eye. Ray nodded.

“Reasonable.”

Then he tried to pick her up. She moved under the dashboard. I smiled.

“Your problem.”

Five minutes later, Katniss was outside. Offended. Blaze was behind the gate with Laura. Laura had arrived with coffee. No folding chair this time. Optimistic. Michael had texted Ray twice. Evan had apparently

requested video. Ray had responded that the van was not a television program. Laura had explained that this was not what Evan meant. Ray had ignored her.

I sat behind the wheel. Ray in the passenger seat. Tom leaned through my window.

"Short loop."

"I know."

"Out the gate. Right turn. Half mile."

"I know."

"Turn around at the gravel pullout."

"I know."

"Come back."

"I know."

"If steering gets worse—"

"Stop."

"If brakes feel strange—"

"Stop."

"If engine changes—"

"Stop."

"If Ray says keep going—"

"Stop."

Ray looked at him.

"That's insulting."

Tom smiled.

"Safety first."

I started the engine. It caught quickly. Not instantly. Quickly enough. Idle rough for a few seconds. Then steady. Better every day. That seemed encouraging. Also slightly terrifying. Machines gain confidence faster than people. I put it in first. Released the clutch. The Volkswagen rolled forward. Past the workshop. Past the picnic table. Past Blaze, who stood as we moved.

His tail started. Katniss sat near the gate. Watching. We reached the gate. Laura opened it. Tom stood beside the road. I stopped before crossing. Not because I needed to. Because the line between driveway and road suddenly mattered. Ray looked at me.

"Well?"

"Traffic."

There wasn't any.

"Road's clear."

"I know."

"Then?"

I looked left. Right. Again. Tom leaned toward the window.

"You waiting for a parade?"

"Possibly."

Ray laughed. I eased forward. Front tires crossed the edge. Then the rear. The Volkswagen entered the road. That simple. No music. No dramatic wind. No sudden revelation. Just pavement. Ray stopped laughing. I shifted into second. The engine climbed. Then settled. The speedometer moved. Ten. Fifteen. Twenty. The steering still had more play than a modern vehicle.

Not unsafe now. Just old. The road curved gently. Trees on one side. Pasture on the other. I had walked this road before. Many times. It looked different through glass. Not better. Different. That mattered. Ray sat very still. Hands on his knees. Again. I glanced at him.

"You okay?"

"Yep."

"That's convincing."

"I am."

"You haven't moved."

"Don't need to."

I looked back at the road. Twenty-five. The van rattled. One cabinet door buzzed. We had fixed the latch. Apparently the rest of the cabinet had opinions. Ray smiled.

"That noise was always there."

"Comforting."

"Ellen hated it."

"More comforting."

The first half mile took several minutes. Not because we were going especially slowly. Because every sound became a question. Rattle. Normal? Buzz. Normal? Whistle. Probably door seal. Clunk. Not normal. I slowed. Ray looked at me.

"What?"

"Clunk."

"Where?"

"Rear."

He listened. Nothing.

Then: Clunk. I stopped. Turn signal. Shoulder. Brake. Engine idled. Ray looked disappointed. I looked at him.

"First rule."

"Don't make it worse."

"Exactly."

Tom had followed in his truck. Of course he had. He pulled in behind us. Got out. Walked up.

"What?"

"Clunk."

"Helpful."

"Rear. Intermittent."

Ray said, "Probably nothing." Tom stared. Ray corrected himself.

"Could be something."

We checked. Nothing obvious. Tom crawled underneath. I waited. Ray waited badly. He paced three steps. Back. Three steps. Back. Laura had followed Tom. She remained in his truck. Smart. Tom emerged.

"Loose exhaust hanger."

Ray sighed.

"That's it?"

"That's enough."

We tightened it. Checked the rest. Tom looked at me.

"Good stop."

Ray said, "Would've made it back." Tom said, "Probably."

"See?"

"That word is doing a lot of work."

We continued. The clunk was gone. Half mile. Gravel pullout. I turned around carefully. The Volkswagen's turning circle was wider than I expected. Ray watched the ditch.

"You're close."

"I'm aware."

"Closer."

"I remain aware."

"Very close."

I stopped. Looked at him.

"Would you like to walk back?"

"No."

"Then trust the driver."

He smiled.

"Just helping."

"You're narrating."

"Important distinction."

I hated that phrase now. We turned. Started back. The road opened slightly. Sun broke through the clouds. Just enough to brighten the wet pavement. I saw the reflection before I understood it. Trees in the road. Sky in the road. The van moving through both. I wanted the camera. Didn't have it in reach. Good. Driving was enough.

Ray looked out the passenger window.

"She used to put her feet on the dash."

"Ellen?"

"Yep."

"Terrible habit."

"I told her."

"Did she stop?"

"No."

"Good marriage."

"Long one."

Silence.

Then:

"First trip after we got married, we drove this thing all night."

"Why?"

"Thought we'd make better time."

"Did you?"

"No."

"Excellent."

"Got lost."

"You had the compass."

"She had the compass."

"That sounds like the problem."

Ray looked at me.

"You're enjoying this too much."

"Very."

We reached the property. Laura opened the gate again. Blaze went wild. Not uncontrolled. Emotionally. His entire rear half moved with his tail. Katniss remained seated. Watching. Judging. I drove into the yard.

Stopped near the workshop. Neutral. Parking brake. Engine off. Silence. Tom parked behind us. He got out.

"Anything?"

"Exhaust hanger."

"After?"

"Good."

"Brakes?"

"Good."

"Steering?"

"Better."

"Temperature?"

"Normal."

"Oil pressure?"

"Good."

Tom nodded. Ray smiled. Laura clapped. Once. Blaze barked. Katniss washed a paw. Success had different expressions. Ray opened his door. Didn't get out immediately. He looked through the windshield. The gate. The road. Then at me.

"One mile."

"Roughly."

"More."

"Tomorrow."

His face fell. I smiled.

"Maybe."

He stared at me.

"You've become unbearable."

"Tom's influence."

Tom heard.

"Good."

Blaze came to the driver's door the moment I opened it. He sniffed me. Then the seat. Then the floor. Then the pedals.

"No."

His tail hit the door. Thunk. He tried to climb in. I blocked him.

"Not yet."

He looked betrayed.

"Your turn is coming."

That helped. Probably not because he understood. Because I scratched his ears. Katniss jumped into the passenger seat. Immediately. Ray looked at her.

"There."

I looked at him.

"What?"

"Now she can sit there."

"No."

"Road test is over."

"Still no."

Katniss curled up. I sighed.

"Fine."

Ray smiled.

"You lose a lot."

"I'm noticing."

The next phase was less exciting. Paperwork. Nothing kills romance like paperwork. Ray had found the title. Eventually. This required opening a metal filing cabinet in the house that had not been opened since approximately the invention of paperwork. The first drawer contained tax records. Second drawer contained appliance manuals. Third contained photographs. Fourth contained something that may have once been an insurance policy.

The title was inside an envelope labeled: **IMPORTANT VAN STUFF** Laura held it up.

"Mom."

Ray nodded.

"Definitely."

We sat at the kitchen table. Title. Registration history. Old receipts. Insurance papers. Maintenance records. Some useful. Some ancient. Some receipts were handwritten. One was for a fuel pump. Ray pointed.

"Arizona."

Laura leaned over.

"California."

"Arizona."

"Then why does the receipt say California?"

Ray stared. I smiled.

"Evidence."

He looked betrayed. The legal transfer needed proper signatures. Current requirements. Registration. Insurance. Possibly inspection depending on what applied locally. Real things. We made a list. No shortcuts. No "good enough." If the van was going to travel, the paperwork needed to be as roadworthy as the brakes. Less romantic. Equally necessary. Ray looked at the title. His name.

Ellen's name beneath it. He stopped. Laura noticed. So did I. He ran one thumb across the paper.

"This is the last thing with both names on it."

Nobody said anything. That sentence needed room. Laura sat beside him.

"Dad."

He nodded.

"Yeah."

"You don't have to do this today."

"I know."

"You can wait."

"I know."

He looked at me. I said nothing. Correct choice. Ray folded the title back into the envelope.

"Tomorrow."

Laura nodded. I nodded. Nobody argued. The road test had gone well. That didn't mean every kind of movement had to happen the same day. We went back outside. Blaze had found a stick. Too large. Naturally. It was longer than he was. He tried to bring it through the workshop doorway. Failed. Backed up. Tried again. Failed differently.

I watched.

"Problem solving."

Laura said, "Persistence." Ray said, "Stupidity." Blaze tried a third angle. The stick went through. He looked delighted. Laura pointed.

"Persistence."

Ray crossed his arms.

"Accidental."

Katniss appeared on the workbench. She watched Blaze carry the stick past. Then looked at us. Her expression suggested none of this required comment. We spent the afternoon fitting a temporary safe travel setup for Blaze. Not permanent. Not pretty. Functional. A sturdy anchor point. Harness arrangement appropriate for his size. Enough room to lie down. No access to the driver's footwell.

Water secured. Nothing loose that could become dangerous. Blaze investigated every strap. Every buckle. Every inch of flooring. Then tried to eat a corner of padding.

“Leave it.”

He stopped. Good. Progress. Getting him into the van was easier now. Old carpet at the step. Command. Pause. Up. He climbed in. Tail. Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. Katniss was already on the bench. She watched. Blaze lay down. The available interior space disappeared. I looked at Ray.

“Remember when this seemed large?”

“No.”

“Good.”

We closed the side door. Not locked. Just closed. Blaze stood. Looked around. Sat. Lay down. Fine. I opened it again. Short acclimation. No road. No stress. Good experience. Done. Katniss remained inside. Of course. I looked at her.

“Out.”

Nothing.

“Training session over.”

Nothing. Ray leaned into the doorway.

“Maybe she’s training you.”

“I reject that.”

“How’s that going?”

I picked her up. She allowed it. I placed her outside. She immediately jumped back in. Ray laughed so hard he had to sit down. I removed her again. She returned. Again. She returned. Again. She returned. I stared. Ray wiped his eyes.

“How many repetitions before the skeleton learns?”

“This isn’t the departure.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

The thought had arrived too early. I ignored it. Mostly. I finally closed the door before Katniss could jump in. She sat outside. Looked at me.

“Victory.”

She walked underneath the van. I looked at Ray.

“Partial victory.”

Late afternoon brought Michael. No Evan. Workday. He stepped out of the truck. Looked at the van.

“Road?”

“One mile.”

Ray said, “More like two.”

“It was not.”

“Out and back.”

“Still one.”

Michael smiled.

“How’d it do?”

“Good.”

Tom, from the workshop, shouted:

“Acceptable.”

Michael nodded.

“That’s basically a standing ovation from him.”

Ray told him about the title. Michael became quieter.

“Tomorrow?”

“Maybe.”

Ray looked toward Tom. Tom smiled. Ray shook his head. Michael sat beside the van. Blaze leaned against him. Again. Michael had stopped pretending he disliked this. He scratched Blaze’s neck.

“Mom would’ve loved him.”

Ray nodded.

“Yep.”

Then Michael looked at Katniss.

“She would’ve loved that one too.”

I said, “No.” Everyone looked at me.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Michael smiled.

“Still denying it?”

“There’s nothing to deny.”

Katniss rubbed against my ankle. Michael looked at Ray. Ray raised both hands.

“I didn’t do that.”

We ate dinner outside. Again. This was becoming routine. Not formal. Not planned. People just stayed. Food appeared. Chairs moved. Blaze positioned himself where crumbs had the highest statistical probability. Katniss rotated between laps according to unknown criteria. I found

myself listening more than speaking. Ray told the California fuel-pump story again. Laura corrected him. Michael sided with Laura.

Ray rejected evidence. Tom wasn't there to settle it. Ray claimed victory. Nobody agreed. After dinner, Michael asked me something.

"When are you leaving?"

The table went quiet. Not dramatically. But enough. I looked at him.

"Don't know."

"Once the van's ready?"

"Probably."

Ray looked down at his coffee. Laura looked at Katniss. I noticed both. Michael nodded.

"Makes sense."

I looked toward the Volkswagen.

"Still needs work."

"Not much."

"Enough."

"Paperwork."

"Yes."

"Interior."

"Enough to travel safely."

"Dog setup."

"Working on it."

He nodded toward Katniss.

"Cat setup."

"No."

Ray laughed into his mug. Michael smiled.

"Right."

Then:

"You going far?"

"Eventually."

"First?"

I thought. That question used to be easy. Whichever road looked interesting. Now it felt different. Because departure had become real. Not immediate. Real.

"Maybe the coast."

Ray looked up.

"West."

“Maybe.”

“Thought you said south.”

“I said both.”

Michael smiled.

“So you don’t know.”

“Correct.”

“Good.”

“Why good?”

“Means you’re not leaving because you have somewhere you have to be.”

I thought about that.

“Maybe.”

Later, after everyone left, Ray and I sat by the workshop. No fire. Warm enough. Blaze asleep. Katniss invisible. Probably near. The Volkswagen sat beneath the trees. New tires. Working lights. One mile of road behind it. Thousands ahead. Potentially. Ray broke the silence.

“You’ll come back?”

There it was. Not casual. I looked at him.

“Yes.”

He nodded.

“Good.”

No joke. I didn’t add one.

After a minute:

“Not right away.”

“I assumed.”

“I’m a traveler.”

“I know.”

“You might regret saying come back.”

“Probably.”

“Workshop will get messy again.”

“Definitely.”

“Fence will lean.”

“Always.”

“Drainage ditch.”

“Don’t remind me.”

He smiled. I looked toward the house.

“Laura will check on you.”

"Too much."

"Michael too."

"Not enough."

I glanced at him. He shrugged.

"Family."

Fair. Then he said, "You know the cat's going with you." I looked at him.

"No."

He looked at me.

"Bone."

"She lives here."

"No."

"Near here."

"She lives wherever she feels like living."

"Exactly."

"She has a feeding place."

"Yep."

"Territory."

"Yep."

"People who know her."

"Yep."

"So she stays."

Ray smiled.

"You keep telling yourself that."

I looked around. No Katniss.

"She's not even here."

Ray pointed. She was sitting on top of the Volkswagen. Silhouetted against the last light. I stared.

"That proves nothing."

"Sure."

I took out the camera. The light was almost gone. Katniss on the roof. Blaze asleep beneath the side door. Ray sitting beside me. The van between them. I raised the camera. Stopped. Ray noticed.

"What?"

"I already have versions of this."

"So?"

"Need something different."

He nodded.

“Good.”

I waited. Katniss stood. Walked along the roof. Jumped down to the hood. Then to the ground. Blaze woke. She approached him. Rubbed once against his shoulder. Then continued toward the house. Blaze stood. Followed two steps. Stopped. Looked at me. I raised the camera. Click. Not the cat. Not the dog. The moment between. Katniss walking away.

Blaze deciding whether to follow. The van behind them. Ray’s house farther back. Paths in opposite directions. I checked it. Quiet. Better. Keeper. Ray looked over.

“Good?”

“Yes.”

“What’d you get?”

I showed him. He studied it.

“Looks like she’s leaving.”

“She is.”

“Looks like he’s deciding.”

“He is.”

Ray smiled.

“You’re going to hate how this turns out.”

I lowered the camera.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Sure.”

The next morning, the title remained inside the house. Unchanged. Ray made breakfast. I fed Blaze. Katniss did not appear. That was unusual. Not alarming. She disappeared. That was what she did. By ten, still no cat. I noticed. Did not mention it. By noon, still no cat. Ray noticed me looking toward the driveway. Didn’t mention it.

By two, I said:

“She usually comes around by now.”

Ray looked up from the workbench.

“Who?”

I stared. He smiled.

“Thought she wasn’t yours.”

“That isn’t relevant.”

“Sure.”

I walked the edge of the property. Not searching. Technically. Blaze came. He sniffed where Katniss usually appeared beneath the fence. Nothing. We went to the barn property where she'd come from. The woman who fed the cats was outside. She recognized me.

"Looking for the tabby?"

"No."

She smiled.

"Sure."

I sighed.

"Have you seen her?"

"This morning."

"Good."

"Headed your way."

I looked back toward Ray's.

"Apparently she got distracted."

"Cat."

There it was again. The universal explanation. I thanked her. Turned back. Blaze stopped. Nose up. Then pulled slightly toward a line of shrubs.

"Easy."

He sniffed. Tail. I followed. Katniss was asleep beneath a bush. Flat on her side. Completely unconcerned. I stared. Blaze stared. She opened one eye.

"Seriously?"

Eye closed. Blaze wagged.

"You are both ridiculous."

I took a picture. Of course. Katniss asleep in dirt beneath a shrub. Blaze's nose at the edge of the frame. Nothing artistic. Nothing profound. Evidence. We walked back. Katniss followed. Eventually. Ray saw us.

"Find your cat?"

"Found a cat."

"Your cat."

"A cat."

"Katniss."

"Yes."

"Who you named."

"That does not establish ownership."

Ray smiled.

“Keep practicing.”

That evening, Ray brought the title outside. He set it on the picnic table. No announcement. No family gathered. No ceremony. Just paper. He sat. I sat across from him. Blaze under the table. Katniss on top of it. Naturally. Ray moved the title before she sat on it. Progress. He looked at Ellen’s name. Then his. Then at me.

“Ready?”

I didn’t answer immediately.

“Are you?”

He nodded.

“Yeah.”

Different from before. No hesitation hiding inside the word. Just yes. We went through everything carefully. No rushing. Correct information. Signatures where required. Nothing completed that legally had to happen elsewhere. This was only the part we could do here. One step. Then the next. Ray signed. The pen stopped at the end of his name. He looked at it.

Then handed it to me. I took it. There are objects that feel heavier because of what they represent. Keys. Compasses. Paper. Apparently ink. I signed where appropriate. Then stopped. No applause. No strange shift in the air. Katniss stepped onto the empty part of the table. Blaze snored beneath it. Ray put the pen down.

“Well.”

“Well.”

“Still not yours until the rest is done.”

“I know.”

“Insurance.”

“I know.”

“Registration.”

“I know.”

“Roadworthy.”

“Tom decides.”

Ray frowned.

“I regret that part.”

“So does everyone.”

He put the papers back into the envelope. **IMPORTANT VAN STUFF.** Still. I smiled.

“Keeping the envelope?”

“Absolutely.”

“Good.”

Ray stood. Then stopped.

“One more thing.”

He went into the house. Returned with the Temporary Home sign. I looked at him.

“No.”

He laughed.

“I’m not giving it to you.”

“Good.”

“I wanted to show you something.”

He turned it over. On the back, written in faded marker, were names. Ellen. Ray. Laura. Michael. Then dates. Trip years. Places. Oregon. California. Idaho. Washington. More than I could read without picking it up. A travel record. Not formal. Not complete. But there.

“I forgot about this,” Ray said.

He touched one entry.

“Ellen started it.”

I looked closer. Different handwriting appeared later. Children probably. Messy. Uneven. Layers. The front said Temporary Home. The back recorded where temporary home had been. That was better than I expected. Ray looked at me.

“Take a picture.”

I did. Not artistic. Straight. Clear. Reference. Then another. Closer. Details. Keeper for different reasons.

“Sign stays here,” Ray said.

“Agreed.”

“But maybe...”

He stopped.

“What?”

“Maybe someday you bring me a list.”

I understood.

“Places the van goes.”

He nodded.

“Doesn’t have to be fancy.”

“I can do better than a list.”

“Photographs?”

“Probably.”

Ray smiled.

“Good.”

I looked at the back of the sign again. Past journeys. Future photographs. Same van. Different people. Not replacement. Continuation. Katniss jumped onto the bench beside us. Ray looked at her.

“You’re going to have to make a decision too.”

I pointed at him.

“Do not encourage her.”

Katniss looked at me. Ray smiled.

“She’s already made it.”

“No.”

“Sure.”

That night I lay in the tent. Blaze beside me. Katniss somewhere outside. The Volkswagen visible through the open flap. Tomorrow, more work. Possibly another road test. Soon, paperwork in town. Insurance. Registration. Storage. Supplies. Then departure. Not tomorrow. Probably not the day after. But close enough that I could feel it. Blaze shifted. I put one hand on his shoulder.

“You ready?”

His tail moved against the blanket. Of course. Outside, something landed lightly on the tent. I knew the sound.

“Katniss.”

Silence. Then movement. Across the roof. Down the side. A striped face appeared at the opening. She stepped inside. Walked over Blaze. He opened one eye. She circled once. Lay against his back. Blaze sighed. I stared at them.

“No.”

Neither moved.

“This arrangement is temporary.”

Purr. Tail. I closed my eyes. The road beyond the gate was open now. That should have been the thing keeping me awake. Instead, I found myself wondering how much room a cat actually needed in a Volkswagen. That was concerning.

CHAPTER 21

The One Who Stayed Nearby

Katniss did not belong to Bone. This was obvious. Bone appeared to be the only one having difficulty with it. She did not belong to Ray either. Or the woman at the barn who put food out every morning. Or the people in town who knew the striped cat that sometimes slept beneath porches, hunted behind buildings, crossed fences without permission, and occasionally appeared in places where nobody remembered seeing her arrive. Katniss belonged where Katniss was. At the moment, that was inside Bone's tent. Pressed against Blaze's back. Blaze was warm. This was useful.

Blaze snored. Katniss opened one eye. The sound stopped. She closed it. The sound returned. She opened the eye again. Blaze continued. Apparently correction would require effort. She went back to sleep.

Morning arrived when Bone moved. Katniss felt it before she saw it. Blanket shifting. Blaze stretching. Bone sitting up. She remained exactly where she was. Bone looked at her. "No." Katniss blinked. "This is becoming a problem." Blaze stood. Katniss slid slightly into the warm place he had left behind. Better. Bone pointed toward the tent opening. "Out." She closed her eyes.

Several minutes passed. Then Bone lifted her. Katniss permitted this. Mostly because resistance would delay breakfast. Bone carried her outside and placed her on the ground. "There." Katniss turned around. Walked back into the tent. Bone stared. Ray laughed from somewhere nearby. Katniss approved of Ray.

There were many things Katniss understood about Bone. He walked. Frequently. He stopped for reasons that made no sense. Light. Clouds. Old buildings. Water. Trees. Occasionally garbage cans. He carried too much. He talked to animals as though conversation required two participants. He believed saying no several times improved the effectiveness of the word. It did not. He smelled like trail dust, canvas, old paper, coffee, smoke from small fires, and increasingly Blaze. Katniss had decided this was acceptable.

Blaze was easier. Blaze smelled like dog. Large dog. Food. Mud. Water. Grass. Whatever he had rolled in. Occasionally something Bone disapproved of. Blaze was loud when surprised. Too interested in squirrels. Unnecessarily enthusiastic about sticks. But he had learned. He no longer rushed toward her. He stopped when Bone told him. Usually. He waited. He watched. He let her walk beneath him without moving. He had also become useful for sleeping. This improved his status considerably.

The Volkswagen was different. Katniss had known it before Bone. Not well. But it had always been there. A large still thing beside Ray's workshop. Warm on sunny days. Cool beneath. Full of smells. Mice sometimes. Old cloth. Dust. Metal. Years. She had walked across its roof before anyone began opening doors. She had slept beneath it. Once, she had chased something into the weeds behind one tire. Nothing about it had mattered. Then Bone started touching it. Ray started touching it. Other people came. The doors opened. Things came out. New smells went in. The large still thing began making noise. Then it moved. Katniss had revised her opinion.

Moving things required caution. Cars especially. Katniss knew roads. She knew engines. She knew the difference between a vehicle parked long enough to climb and one that could suddenly become dangerous. The Volkswagen had spent years being landscape. Now it wasn't. That was inconvenient.

Bone had removed her from the passenger seat repeatedly. Katniss did not understand why. The seat was clearly excellent. Soft enough. Warm when the sun came through the glass. High enough to see outside. And beside Bone. That last part was irrelevant. Mostly.

The morning after the first road test, Bone and Ray worked on paperwork. Katniss did not care about paper. Paper was occasionally useful for sitting. Bone seemed to attach greater significance to it. Humans did that. They put marks on flat objects and then changed their lives because of them. Katniss had never understood this. Ray carried the envelope outside. Bone carried coffee. Blaze followed both. Katniss followed Blaze. Not because she was following. They happened to be going the same direction.

The Volkswagen doors were open. Katniss entered. No one stopped her. This suggested progress. She jumped onto the passenger seat. Curled. Bone looked through the open driver's door. "You know we're not going anywhere." Katniss looked at him. "Good." He walked away. She remained.

Outside, Ray and Bone talked. Katniss listened selectively. Insurance. Registration. Roadworthy. Supplies. Storage. Leaving. That word mattered. Katniss lifted her head.

Leaving was normal. Things left. People left. Animals left. Seasons left. Food bowls emptied and became full again. Barn doors opened and closed. Dogs came through town with people and disappeared by evening. Cars stopped. Cars moved. Bone had always smelled temporary. That was one of the first things Katniss had noticed. He smelled like somebody who carried everything important on his back. People with houses smelled different. Their scents settled. Bone's traveled.

Blaze smelled temporary too. At first. Shelter. Soap. Old kennel smells buried beneath road dust. Then those faded. Blaze began smelling like Bone. Like camp. Like trail. Like whatever place they had slept the night before. Katniss had noticed. She noticed most things.

Ray said, "Probably another couple days." Bone said something. Ray answered. Leaving again. Katniss stood on the passenger seat. Jumped to the floor. Walked out. No one noticed. Good.

She left the property. Not dramatically. Through the fence. Across grass. Past the ditch Bone and Ray had been cleaning. Along the route she had traveled for months before Bone arrived. The barn was still there. Of course. The woman put food out. Katniss ate. Another cat watched from beneath a truck. They ignored each other. Normal.

She slept in the hay for an hour. Then hunted. Unsuccessfully. Then successfully. The distinction mattered mainly to the mouse.

By afternoon, she reached the library. Not inside. Never inside. The low wall beside it. Warm stone. Martha came out carrying a box. She saw Katniss. "Well, there you are." Katniss watched. Martha scratched beneath her chin. Acceptable. "Your skeleton's been looking for you." Katniss's ears shifted. Martha laughed. "Yes. I said your skeleton." Incorrect. But not worth correcting.

Katniss left. Not because of Bone. She had already intended to. Probably.

She returned to Ray's property near dinner. Blaze saw her first. He stood. Tail. Katniss walked toward him. Blaze waited. Good. She rubbed her face against his shoulder. He smelled like dust and old carpet. And van. Interesting.

Bone looked relieved. Katniss noticed. He tried not to. Poorly. "Where have you been?" Katniss continued past him. Bone followed with his eyes. "You know, normal traveling companions usually tell somebody when they disappear." Katniss stopped. Looked back. Bone stared. Then: "You are not a traveling companion." Katniss resumed walking. Ray laughed. Again. Useful man.

That night, the Volkswagen smelled different. Blaze had spent time inside. His scent was everywhere now. Floor. Blanket. Harness. Doorway. Katniss walked through slowly. The interior was changing. Water containers. Temporary storage. Tools. Folded bedding. Bone's camera bag. A book. Only one. Suspicious. The van was becoming something. Not finished. But something.

Katniss jumped onto the bench. Blaze climbed inside after her. His entrance was still awkward. Front paws. Pause. Rear paws. Large body turning badly. Tail striking cabinet. Thunk. Katniss watched. He eventually lay down. Most of the floor disappeared. This was a design problem.

Bone stood in the doorway. "See?" Ray stood behind him. "See what?" "There's no room." "For?" Bone looked at Katniss. Katniss looked at Bone. Ray smiled. "You keep having this argument with somebody who isn't arguing back." "That's what makes it difficult."

Bone reached toward Katniss. She allowed him to scratch behind her ear. He had learned the correct spot. Eventually. "Your life is here." Katniss purred. "Exactly." More scratching. "You have a barn." Purr. "People who feed you." Purr. "Territory." Purr. "You're agreeing with me." Katniss closed her eyes. Bone sighed.

Later, Bone walked. Katniss followed. Not all the way. She stopped near the driveway. He noticed. "Staying?" Katniss sat. Bone nodded. "Good." Then he and Blaze continued. Katniss watched until they disappeared around the bend.

She stayed. For a while. The yard became quiet. Ray went inside. The Volkswagen sat beneath the trees. Katniss jumped onto its roof. Warm metal. Familiar place. She curled her paws beneath her. Waited.

Nothing required waiting. Bone would return. Probably. Blaze would return. Probably. The van would still be there. Probably. Katniss knew better than to trust probably.

She climbed down. Walked toward the road. Stopped at the driveway. Listened. Nothing. She sat.

Five minutes. Ten. Something moved in the brush. She watched. Bird. Not interesting enough. Another ten. Then sound. Blaze first. Tags. Steps. Bone's staff against the ground. Katniss stood.

They appeared around the bend. Blaze saw her. Tail. Bone saw her. He smiled. Small. Automatic. Katniss walked toward them. She did not run. Running suggested urgency. There was none. She rubbed against Blaze. Then Bone. Then turned toward the property. They followed. Correct.

The next day, Bone took the Volkswagen into town. Katniss was not permitted inside. This was unreasonable. She tried the passenger seat.

Removed. She tried the floor. Removed. She went beneath the dashboard. Removed with difficulty. She returned through the side door. Bone closed it. Katniss sat outside.

Blaze remained behind too. This improved matters slightly. Bone and Ray left. The van made noise. Moved. Disappeared through the gate. Katniss watched until it was gone. Blaze stood beside her. He whined once. Katniss looked at him. Unnecessary.

Blaze paced. Gate. Workshop. Gate. Camp. Gate. Katniss sat. Blaze paced again. Eventually she walked beneath him. Rubbed against his front leg. He stopped. Looked down. Then sat beside her. Better.

They waited. Not together. Technically. Katniss sat near the fence. Blaze lay three feet away. Then two. Then his tail touched her. She did not move.

The Volkswagen returned before noon. Blaze stood immediately. Katniss remained seated. Mostly. The van came through the gate. Stopped. Bone got out. Ray got out. Blaze approached. Bone greeted him. Then Bone looked around. Katniss was still sitting by the fence. He saw her. "There you are." Katniss walked away. No reason to make this easy.

Something changed after that trip. Bone carried new papers. Ray carried different papers. There was discussion. Ray shook Bone's hand again. Laura came later. Michael too. People congratulated each other. Humans loved paperwork.

Katniss sat beneath the picnic table. Blaze beside her. She heard: "Registered." "Insured." "Transfer." "Official." Then Ray said: "Now it's his." Katniss looked toward Bone. Bone looked toward the Volkswagen. He did not touch it. Not immediately. Interesting.

Eventually Bone walked over. He put one hand against the side. The same faded metal. Same rust. Same old paint. Nothing looked different. Yet apparently paper had changed it. Humans.

Ray joined him. "You going to name it?" Bone shook his head. "No." "Still?" "Still." "Got any ideas?" "No." Katniss jumped onto the hood. Bone looked at her. "Nothing from you either." Correct.

The days after that became busy. Supplies arrived. Not many. Bone rejected several things Ray suggested. Ray added them anyway. Bone removed them. Ray put them back. Katniss watched this process with increasing interest. Humans also established territory through objects. Poorly.

Blaze's travel space improved. A secured bed area. Harness restraint. Water. Enough room to turn around if he did it carefully. He practiced getting in. Getting out. Waiting. Staying. Katniss practiced none of these. She entered whenever convenient. Exited when done. Nobody had yet improved upon this system.

Bone put one small crate near the bench. Katniss inspected it. Empty. She climbed inside. Bone found her. “No.” He removed her. Filled it with camera equipment. Katniss waited. Later he opened it. She climbed in. Bone stared. “I’m beginning to think this is personal.” It was not. Probably.

One afternoon, Bone sat inside the Volkswagen with a notebook. He made lists. Katniss sat beside him. He read aloud. “Water.” Katniss washed a paw. “Food.” Other paw. “Blaze food.” Face. “First aid.” Ear. “Tools.” Shoulder. “Maps.” Pause. “Books.” Bone looked at the small shelf. “Some.” Katniss continued washing. Then Bone said: “Cat.” Katniss stopped. Bone stared at the notebook. So did Katniss. He drew a line through the word. “No.” Katniss resumed washing.

Ray had seen. He said nothing. For almost thirty seconds. Then: “Progress.” Bone closed the notebook.

That evening, Bone took photographs near the property. Katniss watched from beneath the fence. He photographed the van. Blaze. Light through wet grass. Ray’s workshop. Then stopped. Looked at Katniss. Raised the camera. Katniss turned away. Bone lowered it. Good.

A little later she heard the shutter. She looked back. Bone had photographed something else. Not her. Better.

The following morning, Bone began packing the tent. Katniss noticed immediately. Not because she understood tents. Because scents changed when humans prepared to leave. Canvas folded. Objects disappeared. Bags closed. Food consolidated. Blaze became excited. Ray became quieter. Bone became busier.

Katniss sat on the picnic table. Watched. Bone rolled bedding. Blaze followed him. Bone moved a box. Blaze followed. Bone went to the van. Blaze followed. Bone returned. Blaze followed. Katniss remained still.

Ray came outside. “Tomorrow?” Bone nodded. “Probably.” Ray looked toward Katniss. Katniss looked away. “West?” “Maybe.” “Coast?” “Eventually.” Ray smiled. “Still no destination.” “I have several.” “That means no.” “Correct.”

Tomorrow. Katniss knew the word. Not exactly. But tone. Humans used certain sounds differently when time mattered. Tomorrow had weight.

She left the property. Bone noticed. He did not call her back. Good.

Katniss went to the barn. Ate. Slept. Walked the fence line. Visited the shed. Hunted. Sat beneath the old truck. The places were the same. Every scent familiar. Every path known. Nothing had changed.

She climbed into the hayloft. Looked through a broken opening in the boards. Ray’s property was not visible. Too far. That was fine.

She slept. Woke. Moved to another place. Slept again. By evening, she was near the library. Martha saw her. “Not with your people tonight?” Katniss looked at her. Martha smiled. “Apparently not.” She scratched Katniss once. Then went inside.

Your people. Incorrect. Probably.

Katniss walked after dark. Back toward the barn. Then stopped. The road divided. One direction barn. One direction Ray’s. She knew both.

She sat. Listened. Night insects. Distant vehicle. Wind. Nothing calling her. Good.

Katniss went toward the barn. Twenty steps. Stopped. Turned. Returned to the fork. Sat again. This was irritating.

She went toward Ray’s property. Not because of Bone. The tent had been comfortable. Not because of Blaze. Although Blaze was warm. Not because of the Volkswagen. Although the passenger seat was excellent. There were reasons. None required naming.

When she reached Ray’s driveway, the tent was gone. Katniss stopped. The campsite looked wrong. Empty patch. Picnic table. Chair. No canvas. No bedding. No familiar small shelter.

Blaze was sleeping beside the Volkswagen. He lifted his head. Saw her. Tail. Katniss walked over. He stood. She rubbed against him. He smelled different again. Packed. Ready.

Bone appeared from inside the van. “There you are.” Katniss looked at him. He came closer. Crouched. For once he did not tell her she belonged somewhere else. He scratched behind her ears. Longer than usual. Then: “We leave in the morning.” Katniss leaned into his hand. “You’ll be fine here.” Purr. “Ray likes you.” Purr. “The barn people feed you.” Purr. “You know everybody.” Purr. Bone sighed. “You are extremely bad at goodbyes.” Katniss closed her eyes.

Bone stood. Went inside the Volkswagen. Blaze lay beside the open door. Katniss jumped onto the passenger seat. Bone looked at her. “No.” She curled up. He stared. Then laughed quietly. Not much. “Fine.” He did not remove her. Not tonight.

Katniss slept there. Passenger seat. Window beside her. Blaze on the floor below. Bone somewhere behind. The van smelled like all of them now. Bone. Blaze. Ray. Old cloth. Tools. Coffee. Books. Dust. New rubber. Road. And Katniss.

Before sunrise, she woke. Nobody else had. She climbed down. Stepped over Blaze. Jumped through the open side door. Outside.

The farm was quiet. She walked to the fence. Sat. Behind her, the Volkswagen waited. Ahead, the familiar path led toward the barn.

Katniss knew where the food would be. She knew where the warm hay was. She knew the sheds. The walls. The gaps beneath porches. The hunting places. The people who would scratch her ears. She knew this territory.

Behind her, Blaze shifted inside the van. Bone coughed. Or made the sound he used instead. Metal clicked. Morning beginning.

Katniss remained at the fence. For a long time. Then she stood. She walked through the opening. Away from the van. Toward the barn.

Twenty feet. Thirty. She stopped. Looked back. The Volkswagen was partly hidden by trees. Still there. For now.

Katniss sat. Her tail curled around her paws. Nothing forced her to choose. That mattered. She had never stayed anywhere because she had to. She had never followed anyone because they asked. She would not begin now.

Behind her lay everything she knew. Ahead of her lay a van that would leave. A skeleton who kept saying no. A dog who waited instead of chasing. A passenger seat. Unknown roads. Unknown places. Unknown smells.

Katniss stood. And walked. Not toward the barn. Not yet. Back toward the Volkswagen. Just to see what happened next.

CHAPTER 22

The Decision Nobody Asked For

Katniss returned before sunrise. Bone was awake. Of course he was. He had slept badly again. Not because anything was wrong. Because leaving had finally become something that could happen. There were too many last things. Last night at Ray's. Last morning at the campsite. Last check of the van. Last cup of coffee before the road became unfamiliar again. Bone disliked last things. They tended to announce themselves too loudly.

He was sitting on the open side step of the Volkswagen when Katniss appeared through the fence. She walked toward him. Slow. Casual. As though she had not spent part of the night somewhere else considering whatever cats considered. Bone watched her come. Did not call. Did not smile. Mostly.

Katniss reached the van. Blaze woke. His tail hit the floor. Thunk. Katniss rubbed against his nose. Then stepped into the Volkswagen. Bone looked at her. "No." She sat on the passenger seat. Blaze looked at Bone. "Don't." Tail.

Ray came outside carrying coffee. He saw Katniss. "Well." Bone looked at him. "Nothing has happened." Ray nodded. "Sure." "She came back." "Looks like." "That's all." "Definitely." Bone pointed at him. "You are enjoying this." "Very much."

Morning became loading. Not hurried. Bone had packed most things the night before. Still, there were always more things than expected. Water. Blaze's food. Dry food for Bone. Cooking gear. First aid. Tools. Camera equipment. Books. One crate of books. Ray looked at it. "Some?" Bone looked at him. "Compared to a library." "That isn't the standard." "It is now."

The Volkswagen swallowed more than Bone expected. Then less. Blaze's travel space took up a large portion of the interior. Water took another. Food another. Tools. Bedding. Camera case. Books. By the time Bone finished loading, the van looked considerably smaller. Ray leaned

inside. “You forgot the cat shelf.” Bone stared. “There is no cat shelf.” Katniss jumped onto the top of a cabinet. Ray pointed. “Apparently there is.”

Bone took her down. Set her outside. She walked around the van. Entered through the passenger door. Bone removed her. She entered through the side door. Bone removed her. She jumped through an open window. Bone stared. Ray had to set down his coffee.

“This is not funny.” Ray was laughing too hard to answer. Bone lifted Katniss again. Carried her ten feet away. Placed her on the ground. “Stay.” Katniss looked at him. Bone paused. “That works on Blaze.” Katniss sat. “Good.” Bone walked back to the van. Three steps. Four. Five. Katniss passed him. Walked straight into the Volkswagen. Ray bent over laughing.

Bone stopped. Closed his eyes. Blaze’s tail thumped from inside. “Nobody asked you.” Thunk. Thunk.

Ray wiped his eyes. “I don’t think this is your decision.” Bone looked at him. There it was. Exactly the thing he had been trying not to hear.

“She lives here.” Ray nodded. “Apparently not.” “She has territory.” “Had.” “Food.” “She’ll have food.” “People.” “She picked people.” Bone looked toward the Volkswagen. Katniss was on the passenger seat again. Watching through the windshield.

Bone walked over. Opened the door. Katniss did not move. He crouched. “Are you seriously doing this?” Katniss blinked. “You understand this is not a short ride.” Nothing. “We’re leaving.” Nothing. “We may not come back for a while.” One ear moved. “You have no idea where we’re going.” Still. Bone sighed. “Neither do I.”

Ray stepped closer. “That’s probably why she trusts you.” Bone looked at him. “That makes no sense.” “Cat.” There it was again. The universal answer.

Bone reached toward Katniss. She leaned into his hand. Not much. Enough. He scratched behind her ear. Long pause. Then: “Fine.” Ray smiled. Bone pointed without looking at him. “Do not.”

Blaze stood. Tail moving. Katniss jumped down from the passenger seat. Walked past him. Rubbed once against his chest. Then climbed onto the bench. Bone watched. “So this is happening.” Ray nodded. “Looks like.”

Bone opened his notebook. Added one line beneath supplies. Katniss. He stared at the word. Then beneath it: Apparently. Ray read over his shoulder. “Good.” Bone closed the notebook.

They still were not ready. Of course not. Nothing important ever happened exactly when expected. Tom arrived at eight. Not because he

needed to. Because he wanted to. He walked around the Volkswagen one last time. Tires. Lights. Mirrors. Belts. Engine. Fluids. Brakes. Then he looked at Bone. “Roadworthy.” Ray smiled. Bone nodded. Tom added: “Mostly.” Ray groaned.

“What’s mostly?” “Old.” “That’s not a defect.” “It is when parts are involved.” “Specific.” Tom shrugged. “You’re carrying tools.” “Yes.” “Spare belt?” “Yes.” “Hoses?” “Yes.” “Fluids?” “Yes.” “First aid?” “Yes.” “Common sense?” Bone looked at Ray. “Limited.” Tom nodded. “Then you’re as ready as you’re going to be.”

Laura arrived next. Then Michael. Then Evan. Bone stared. “Did everyone schedule this?” Ray shrugged. “Maybe.” “You told them.” “Maybe.”

Laura brought food. Michael brought a small tool roll. Bone tried to refuse it. Michael put it in the van. “Mom always carried one.” “I already have tools.” “Now you have more.” “That’s how weight happens.” Michael smiled. “You’re driving now.” Unfortunate logic.

Evan brought a photograph. The one he had taken of Ray and Michael beside the Volkswagen. He had printed it. Bone looked at it. “Good choice.” Evan smiled. “Thought you might want it.” “I do.” Bone put it carefully inside the camera case. Not with tools. Not with food. Not somewhere it would get bent.

Laura handed Ray something. The Temporary Home sign. Ray looked confused. “Thought this stayed inside.” “It does.” She turned it over. On the back, beneath the old names and places, she had added one small line: Next: ? Ray stared. Laura smiled. “Thought we could leave some room.” Bone looked at it. “That’s dangerous.” “Why?” “Question marks invite answers.” Ray smiled. “That’s the point.”

The sign went back into the house. Not the van. Important.

Martha arrived. Nobody knew who invited her. She claimed nobody had. Small town. Bone believed her. Mostly. She brought a book. Local history. Thin. Used. Bone looked at it. “You’re making the book problem worse.” “You can trade it later.” “That’s manipulative.” “Library.” “Right.”

The woman from the barn came too. That surprised Bone. She walked straight to Katniss. Katniss was sitting on the Volkswagen’s side step. The woman crouched. “Well.” Katniss rubbed against her hand. Bone watched. “If she wants to stay...” The woman looked at him. “She won’t.” “You don’t know that.” “I’ve known her longer than you.” “That’s unfair.” “True.”

She scratched Katniss under the chin. Then looked at Bone. “She comes back when she wants.” Bone nodded. “If she comes back.” “She will if she wants.” That was not comforting. It was, however, accurate.

Bone looked at Katniss. “You hear that?” Katniss turned away. “Excellent.”

The goodbyes were not dramatic. Bone preferred that. Tom shook his hand. “Listen to the engine.” “I will.” “Don’t ignore new noises.” “I won’t.” “Don’t let Ray convince you something is normal just because it’s old.” Ray objected. Nobody listened.

Laura hugged Bone. That surprised him. He returned it awkwardly. Skeletons were not built for hugging. People kept trying anyway. She stepped back. “Send pictures.” “Good ones?” “All of them.” Ray called from behind her: “Good ones.” Laura turned. “All.” Bone smiled. “Negotiations continue.”

Michael shook Bone’s hand. Then looked at the van. “Don’t make it a food truck.” “I promise.” “Don’t paint over everything.” “I won’t.” “Don’t baby it either.” Bone looked at him. “That one I can do.” Michael nodded. “Good.”

Evan held out his fist. Bone stared. Evan waited. Bone bumped it. “Modern ritual?” “Basically.” “Strange.” “You’ll learn.” “Unlikely.”

Martha shook his hand. “Bring the book back someday.” Bone looked at the cover. “That’s a long checkout.” She smiled. “I know where Ray lives.” Threatening librarian. Excellent.

Then came Ray. Nobody spoke. The others had begun drifting away slightly. Not leaving. Giving room. Ray stood beside the driver’s door. Bone stood opposite him. Blaze inside. Katniss on the passenger seat. Of course.

Ray held out the keys. Bone already had them. Technically. But Ray had added something. A second key. Old. Worn. Different ring. Bone looked. “What’s this?” “House.” Bone stared. “Your house?” “Back door.” “Why?” Ray shrugged. “You said you’d come back.” Bone didn’t answer. Ray continued. “Figure if I’m not here, somebody should know where the coffee is.” Bone looked at him. “That’s either trust or poor judgment.” “Both.”

Bone took the key. Put it on a separate ring. Not with the van key. Different thing. Different meaning.

Ray looked toward the Volkswagen. “She would’ve liked this.” Bone knew who he meant. Ellen. He didn’t pretend otherwise. “I hope so.” “She would.” Ray smiled. “Probably complain about your storage.” “Laura already did.” “Then definitely.”

Bone held out his hand. Ray ignored it. He hugged him. Briefly. Hard. Bone froze for half a second. Then hugged back. Awkwardly. Again.

When Ray stepped away, he looked annoyed with himself. “Don’t make a thing out of that.” “I wouldn’t dare.” “Good.”

Bone climbed into the driver's seat. Ray stood beside the open door. "Still no name?" "Still." Ray nodded. "Good." "Why good?" "Means you're waiting." Bone looked at the steering wheel. "Seems to be a theme."

He closed the door. Started the engine. It caught. Settled. Familiar now. Not completely. Enough.

Blaze was secured in back. Excited. Very. Katniss remained on the passenger seat. Unsecured. This became a problem immediately. Bone looked at her. "You cannot ride there loose." Katniss looked forward. Bone looked out the window. "Ray." Ray smiled. "Not my cat." Bone stared. "You're dead to me." Ray laughed.

The barn woman had anticipated this. She held up a small pet carrier. Bone looked horrified. "No." Katniss looked more horrified. "Absolutely not." The woman shrugged. "Then harness." She held that up too. Bone stared. "You planned this." "Cat."

Ten minutes later, Katniss wore a properly fitted harness. She hated everyone. This was clear. Bone attached her securely in a way that allowed safe movement without access to pedals or open doors. Katniss sat rigidly. Blaze watched. Bone looked at him. "Do not laugh." Blaze's mouth was open. Possibly panting. Possibly laughing.

Bone put the van in first. The group stepped back. Ray stood nearest the gate. Of course.

Bone drove forward. Slowly. Past the workshop. Past the picnic table. Past the place where his tent had been. Past the fence they had repaired. Past the drainage ditch he now hated personally.

At the gate, Bone stopped. Ray leaned toward the window. "Forget something?" Bone looked around. "Probably." Ray nodded. "Good." "Good?" "If you remembered everything, you'd never leave." Bone smiled. "That's annoyingly good." "I learned from you." "Terrible influence."

Ray stepped back. Bone looked ahead. Road. Same road as before. Not the same moment.

He crossed the gate. Blaze stood until his restraint stopped him. Then sat. Katniss remained rigid with insult. Bone shifted into second. The Volkswagen moved.

In the mirror, Ray's property grew smaller. Ray remained at the gate. Laura beside him. Michael. Evan. Tom. Martha. The barn woman. A strange collection of people who had somehow become part of the journey without going anywhere. Bone watched until the road curved. Then they disappeared.

He looked forward. Silence. For approximately four seconds. Then Blaze whined. Katniss pulled against the harness. A cabinet rattled.

Something rolled somewhere it should not have been able to roll. Bone sighed. “Excellent.”

The road climbed gently. Trees opened. Morning light spread across pasture. The van sounded steady. Bone listened. Always. Engine. Wind. Cabinet. Blaze breathing. Katniss expressing disapproval through silence. Everything normal. Probably.

After ten miles, Bone pulled into a safe turnout. Not because anything was wrong. Because first trips deserved checks. He walked around. Tires. Leaks. Nothing. Temperature good. Everything where it belonged. Mostly.

He opened the side door. Blaze looked ready to explode. “Wait.” Blaze waited. Barely. Bone released him carefully. Leash on. Blaze jumped down. Sniffed the entire state.

Katniss remained inside. Bone looked at her. “You can come out.” She stared. “You’re the one who wanted to come.” Nothing. Bone unclipped her from the travel tether but kept the harness and leash secure. He carried her outside. She flattened against him. Not fear exactly. Overload. Cars in distance. New place. New smells. Wind. Bone set her down near the van. She crouched. Blaze approached. Slow. Katniss moved toward him. Rubbed against his front leg. Blaze stood still. Then Katniss sat. Better.

Bone crouched nearby. “No rush.” Katniss looked at him. “See? I can learn.”

After several minutes, she stood. Sniffed. Moved three feet. Then five. Stopped. Listened. The world was unfamiliar. Bone understood that. He had once liked that feeling immediately. Not everyone did.

They stayed twenty minutes. Not because Bone needed to. Because Katniss did. That was new.

Eventually she jumped back into the van voluntarily. Bone looked at Blaze. “Well.” Blaze wagged. “Apparently we’re ready.”

They continued west. Not directly. Bone still disliked direct. The route followed smaller roads. Forested hills. Open fields. Old towns. Places with signs promising things that were no longer there.

By midday, they stopped near a river. Public access. Legal parking. Blaze allowed. Bone checked. Always.

The river was broad. Gray-green. Fast enough to matter. Bone took his camera. Blaze sniffed. Katniss remained near the van at first. Harness and long lead. Not because Bone expected obedience. Because he was not an idiot. Usually.

Light moved through broken clouds. The river changed every few seconds. Dark. Silver. Green. Bone waited. Blaze discovered mud. Katniss discovered a stump. Everyone had priorities.

Bone framed the river. Not enough. Moved. Waited. Cloud opened. A strip of sunlight crossed the water. Blaze wandered into the lower edge of the frame. Bone almost lowered the camera. Then Katniss jumped onto the stump. Both facing opposite directions. One watching water. One watching trees. The van faintly visible behind them. Not planned. Good. Click.

Bone checked. Keeper. First keeper on the road. That mattered. He didn't say it.

They ate lunch. Bone. Blaze. Katniss technically already had eaten but believed lunch should be reconsidered. Bone offered her appropriate food. She sniffed it. Looked at him. "That is food." Katniss looked toward Bone's sandwich. "No." She sat closer. "No." Blaze watched. "Do not teach her."

They stayed longer than planned. There was no plan. So technically impossible.

A fisherman arrived. Older man. He saw Bone. Then Blaze. Then Katniss in a harness near the van. He stopped. "Cat?" Bone looked. "Apparently." The fisherman nodded. "Had one used to ride in my truck." Bone stared. "Don't encourage this." The man laughed.

They talked. Fishing. Roads. Weather. A bridge downstream built after an older crossing washed out decades before. Bone listened. History found him even when he wasn't looking. Useful.

The fisherman left. Bone wrote the bridge note down. Then looked at Katniss. She was asleep beneath the Volkswagen. Blaze beside her. Of course.

They drove again in late afternoon. Not far. Bone didn't want the first day to become an endurance test. For himself. Blaze. Katniss. The van. Everyone was learning.

They found a campground before evening. Nothing spectacular. Trees. Fire rings. Picnic tables. Clean water. Legal. Enough. Bone paid. Chose a site near the edge. Not isolated. Quiet.

Parking the Volkswagen took two attempts. Ray would have mocked him. Bone missed that immediately. That was inconvenient.

He opened the side door. Blaze climbed out. Better now. Katniss waited. Bone expected another argument. Instead, she jumped down after Blaze. Harness on. Leash secured. Then immediately tried to go under the neighboring picnic table. "Boundaries." She ignored him. "Good to know nothing has changed."

Camp took less time. That was the first major surprise. Tent? No. Sleeping pad? Already inside. Food? Stored. Water? Stored. Books? Stored. Camera? Stored. Blaze's food? Stored. Bone stood beside the van. Hands empty. "This is suspicious." Blaze looked up. "Travel shouldn't be this easy." Katniss jumped onto the picnic table. Bone nodded. "There it is."

He still set up outside. Chair. Small stove. Water. Blaze's bowl. Katniss's bowl. He paused after placing the second one. Looked at it. Then at Katniss. She was washing her paw. "I want the record to show I objected." Nothing.

Dinner. Quiet. No Ray. No Tom. No Laura arriving with coffee. No Michael. No Evan. No workshop. Bone felt the absence. Not badly. Just clearly.

He had spent years being good at leaving. This time leaving had weight. That was new.

After dinner, he took out Martha's book. Read. Blaze slept near his feet. Katniss wandered to the end of her lead. Sat. Watched the trees. Bone looked over the top of the page. There were three of them now. Actually three. Not theoretically. Not temporarily. Not according to everyone except Bone. Three.

He closed the book. "Well." Blaze's tail moved. Katniss looked back. Bone sighed. "Fine."

Later, the sky cleared. Stars appeared between trees. Bone took the camera. Not immediately. He waited. A vehicle passed somewhere distant. Then silence returned. The van sat beneath the stars. Blaze asleep beside the wheel. Katniss on the roof. Of course. Harness line safely arranged. Bone stared. "How did you even get up there?" Katniss sat. No answer.

He framed the photograph. Old Volkswagen. No name. No artwork. Faded paint. Rust. New tires. Blaze below. Katniss above. Stars beyond. First night away from Ray's property. Click.

He checked it. Keeper. Definitely.

Bone lowered the camera. Looked toward the road beyond camp. Tomorrow it would continue. Not toward Echo. Bone did not know Echo existed. Not toward Tangle. Not toward anything planned. Just road. That was important.

Katniss jumped down. Not gracefully. She misjudged one step. Recovered immediately. Looked around to see if anyone had noticed. Bone looked at Blaze. Blaze looked at Bone. Neither reacted. Good survival instinct.

Katniss walked over. Jumped into Bone's chair. Bone was still standing. He looked at her. "That's mine." She curled up. "Of course." Bone took the other chair. There was no other chair. He sat on the van step.

Blaze moved closer. Rested his head against Bone's leg. Katniss purred from the stolen chair. Bone looked at both of them. Then at the road. Some trails were traveled alone. He knew that. He had traveled enough of them. Some trails were traveled together. He was beginning to understand that part. And apparently some cats simply refused to let the distinction remain theoretical. Bone smiled. "Good night." Blaze sighed. Katniss purred. The Volkswagen ticked softly as its engine cooled. For the first time, Ray's property was behind them. The road was ahead. And nobody had any idea what came next. That was exactly how Bone liked it.

CHAPTER 23

Room for Three

The first problem with traveling in a Volkswagen was space. The second problem was also space. The third problem was Katniss. This was technically still space.

Bone woke before sunrise because Blaze had decided that sleeping horizontally was a concept designed by people who did not own large dogs. Blaze occupied most of the floor. One front leg extended beneath the bench. One rear leg blocked a cabinet. His tail had somehow found the narrowest walkway. Katniss occupied Bone's chair. Still. Bone had not reclaimed it. This was beginning to establish precedent.

He sat up. Looked around. The Volkswagen was dark except for faint gray light at the windows. Quiet campground. Cool air. No rain. Good.

Blaze opened one eye. Bone looked at him. "You are enormous." Tail moved once. Thunk. Katniss opened one eye from the chair. Bone looked at her. "You are smaller." She closed the eye. "Not less inconvenient."

Bone climbed out through the side door. Blaze remained inside. Katniss remained inside. Bone stood outside alone. He looked back. "Interesting." Neither followed. Apparently the first morning of road travel had already produced independence.

Coffee came first. It usually did. Bone sat on the van step while water heated. He could hear birds. A vehicle starting several campsites away. Someone closing a cooler. A child asking a question too loudly for the hour. Normal campground morning.

Then Blaze appeared. Slowly. Front paws on the step. Pause. Bone watched. "Take your time." Blaze climbed down. Better than yesterday. Not graceful. But better. He stretched. Then immediately began smelling everything within available leash radius.

Katniss appeared in the doorway. She stopped. Looked out. The world remained unfamiliar. Bone did not reach for her. Did not call. He waited.

Katniss stepped onto the edge. Paused. Then retreated. Bone nodded. "Also acceptable."

Blaze looked toward the door. Bone shortened the leash slightly. “Give her room.” Blaze sat. Good.

Katniss appeared again. One paw. Then two. Then down. She landed beside the van. Crouched. Listened. Bone watched her ears move. Left. Right. Back. Forward. Processing.

A crow called from a tree. Katniss looked up. Blaze looked up. Bone looked at both of them. “No.” Neither moved. “Excellent.”

Breakfast was complicated. Not because the food was complicated. Because three creatures now had opinions. Bone wanted coffee and something simple. Blaze wanted Blaze’s food. Katniss wanted whatever Bone had.

Bone put down her bowl. She sniffed it. Looked at him. “This again?” Nothing. “It’s good food.” Katniss looked toward Bone’s breakfast. “No.” Blaze looked toward Bone’s breakfast. “Also no.” Blaze looked toward Katniss’s bowl. “Absolutely no.”

Bone sat. Katniss sat closer. Blaze sat closer. Bone looked at both. “This is extortion.”

A man walking past with a small dog laughed. Bone looked over. “Do not encourage them.” The man kept walking. Still laughing.

After breakfast came packing. Except there wasn’t much packing. Bone folded the chair. Katniss objected. She had been sitting in it. “Temporary inconvenience.” She moved to the picnic table. Bone packed the stove. Stored bowls. Checked water. Checked Blaze’s travel harness. Checked Katniss’s harness. Katniss noticed. She left.

Bone stopped. “Katniss.” She walked faster. “Come back.” No. Bone looked at Blaze. “You stay.” Blaze sat. Good.

Katniss moved under the van. Bone crouched. “No.” Two eyes stared from darkness. “You chose this.” No movement. “The harness is not optional.” Still. Bone sighed. “This relationship has become heavily administrative.”

He waited. Katniss remained under the van. Bone did not reach beneath. That would end badly for everyone. Mostly Bone.

He took out the food bowl. Katniss’s ears moved. Bone stared. “Seriously?” He put one piece of food in the bowl. Katniss emerged. Bone clipped the harness. Katniss realized the betrayal. Too late.

Blaze watched. Bone pointed at him. “Not a word.”

They left the campground around eight. Bone had no firm destination. He had a direction. West. Mostly. That was enough.

The road narrowed. Then widened. Then narrowed again. Forested hills gave way to open farmland. Old barns leaned toward fields. Mailboxes appeared in clusters. Small towns passed. Some with diners.

Some with gas stations. Some with both. Some with buildings that looked as though the town had forgotten why they were there. Bone liked those.

The Volkswagen settled into a rhythm. Not quiet. Never quiet. But predictable. Engine. Wind. Road. Cabinet. Blaze shifting. Katniss occasionally objecting to restraint.

Bone drove with the window cracked. Cool air. Pine. Wet earth. Occasional livestock.

Blaze discovered cows. This became an event. He stood as much as his travel restraint allowed. Ears forward. Tail moving. Bone looked in the mirror. “Cows.” Blaze stared. “Very large dogs that do not want to meet you.” Blaze continued staring. Katniss looked once. Then lost interest.

Bone smiled. “Different priorities.”

The first stop came earlier than planned. Again, there was no plan. Blaze needed a break. Katniss probably did too. Bone definitely needed to stretch. The Volkswagen had improved many things. It had not improved old seats.

He pulled into a roadside rest area. Small. Clean. Trees. Picnic tables. A map board. Bone liked map boards.

Blaze exited first. Better again. Progress measured in paws. Katniss waited. Bone opened the passenger door. She stayed. He gave her time.

Eventually she climbed onto the seat edge. Then the ground. No carrying. Bone smiled. “See?” Katniss ignored him. Still. Progress.

The map showed rivers. Roads. Trails. A state forest. Small historical markers. Bone leaned closer. Blaze sniffed the base of the sign. Katniss sat beneath the bench.

A faded photograph on the board caught Bone’s attention. Old bridge. Timber trucks. Workers. Date from decades earlier. He read. A river crossing had once connected logging communities before a newer highway changed traffic patterns. Nothing famous. Exactly the kind of history Bone liked.

A couple stopped beside him. Older. Travel trailer parked nearby. The woman pointed toward the photograph. “That bridge isn’t there anymore.” Bone looked at her. “Washed out?” “Flood.” The man nodded. “Late seventies.” The woman said, “Seventy-eight.” “Seventy-seven.” “Seventy-eight.” He looked at Bone. “Seventy-eight.” She smiled. “Good choice.”

Bone asked questions. Of course. They had grown up nearby. The bridge had been wood. Then reinforced. Then damaged. Then gone. The new road made rebuilding unnecessary. Eventually the old crossing became memory.

Bone wrote it down. Not the date. Not yet. He had learned. Memory first. Verification later.

The woman noticed Blaze. “Big dog.” “Yes.” “What is he?” “Unresolved.” She laughed. “Good answer.”

Then she noticed Katniss. “Cat?” Bone closed his eyes. “Apparently.” The man nodded toward the Volkswagen. “Traveling?” “Yes.” “With the cat?” Bone looked toward Katniss. She was sitting beneath the picnic table. “Apparently.”

The woman smiled. “We had one who rode in our motorhome.” Bone stared. “Why does everybody know a traveling cat?” “Maybe you’re the last to find out.” “That seems statistically unlikely.”

They left. Bone watched their trailer disappear. Then looked at Katniss. “You are becoming less unique by the hour.” Katniss washed one paw.

They stayed longer. Not because of the map. Because the light changed. Clouds moved in. Bright. Dark. Bright again. The old road curved away from the rest area. A line of wet grass. Rusty guardrail. Trees beyond. Bone took out the camera.

He framed the old road. Waited. A truck passed. Ruined it. Waited again. Another truck. Worse.

Blaze sat beside him. Katniss remained beneath the table. Bone waited. Five minutes. Ten. The road became quiet. Cloud covered the sun. Flat light. Bone lowered the camera. “Of course.”

He started to put it away. Then the cloud edge broke. Light hit only the old guardrail. Not road. Not trees. Just weathered metal. Bone stopped. Raised the camera. Click.

He checked. Simple. Rust. Light. Empty road. Keeper. Probably.

They continued. By noon, the scenery changed again. A long valley. Fields. Low hills. A river somewhere beyond trees. Bone could smell water before seeing it. Blaze probably could too. Katniss? Impossible to know.

Bone found a public riverside area. Parking. Tables. Walking path. Pets permitted on leash. Good.

Blaze got out. Then Katniss. Faster this time. Interesting.

The river was slower than yesterday’s. Wide. Brown-green. Sun on the surface. A bridge downstream. Modern concrete. Nothing romantic. Bone liked it. Bridges that worked deserved respect.

They walked. Not far. Bone kept the pace easy. Blaze was still conditioning. Katniss was still learning the traveling routine. Bone was still learning how to walk with both of them without becoming a badly organized parade.

Katniss moved differently on the harness now. Not comfortably. But less offended. She investigated grass. Stopped at every interesting scent. Tried to enter brush. Bone prevented that. She looked at him. “Wildlife.” Nothing. “Ticks.” Nothing. “Unknown holes.” Nothing. “Also you would disappear.” Katniss stared. Bone nodded. “That one.”

Blaze walked ahead. Then back. Then ahead. Checked in. Good.

A family passed with bicycles. Two children. One stopped. “Is that a cat?” Bone looked at Katniss. “Current evidence suggests yes.” The child looked at Bone. “Why is she walking?” Bone thought. “Strong opinions.” The child’s father laughed. Katniss did not.

They reached a shaded section. Bone sat on a bench. Blaze lay beside it. Katniss climbed onto the bench. Then Bone’s lap. Bone stared down. “You have the entire bench.” Purr. “Entire.” Purr. “Excellent.”

Bone took out Martha’s book. Read two pages. Katniss fell asleep. Blaze slept. Bone stopped reading. Looked around. River. Leaves. Distant traffic. Three travelers doing absolutely nothing.

He liked it. That was becoming common.

Eventually Bone took a photograph. Not of the river. Not the bridge. Blaze asleep beneath the bench. Katniss asleep across Bone’s lap. His own boots visible at the bottom. Not technically elegant. Not carefully composed. Just what the afternoon looked like. Click.

Katniss opened one eye at the sound. Bone looked at her. “Evidence.” Eye closed.

Lunch happened there. Bone ate. Blaze ate. Katniss ate her own food after pretending not to want it for several minutes. Progress sometimes required preserving dignity.

Bone checked the map afterward. The coast was still a long way. Good. No hurry.

He chose a smaller road. It followed the river for a while. Then climbed. The Volkswagen worked harder. Bone listened. Temperature steady. Engine note different. Normal. Probably.

He downshifted. The van slowed. Blaze adjusted. Katniss woke. Bone looked in the mirror. “Mountain.” Neither cared.

Near the top, Bone found a turnout. View. Large one. Valley behind. Road curling below. Mountains distant. Clouds gathering.

He parked. Got out. Stood. Didn’t reach for the camera. Not yet.

Wind moved across the overlook. Cooler. Blaze stepped out. Fur moving. Katniss remained inside. Bone left the door open.

The valley was beautiful. Too beautiful. The sort of place people immediately photographed without actually seeing. Bone waited.

A car arrived. Three people got out. Took pictures. Left. Another arrived. Same. Bone remained.

Blaze sat. Bone sat beside him. No camera.

Katniss eventually appeared. She stood in the doorway. Wind touched her. She retreated. Bone smiled. “Reasonable.”

Twenty minutes. Clouds darkened. The valley changed. Sunlight disappeared from the foreground. Stayed on the distant hills. The road below became a pale line through shadow. Bone stood. Camera.

He framed the valley. Too much. Moved. Included the road. Better. Waited.

A patch of sunlight crossed the distant slope. Then moved. Bone tracked it. Not with the camera. With patience.

The light reached a bend in the road. Only that bend. Everything else remained dark. Click.

Gone. Bone checked. Road. Shadow. Light. No van. No Blaze. No Katniss. Just the place. Keeper. Definitely.

Bone looked at Blaze. “Worth waiting.” Blaze sneezed. “Strong review.”

They drove down the other side. Slow. Careful. Old van. Old brakes now rebuilt. Still old. Bone respected gravity. Gravity had never respected anyone.

By late afternoon, he began looking for a place to stop. Campground. Legal overnight area. Something simple.

The first campground was full. Bone stared at the sign. FULL. “Good.” Blaze looked at him. “Now we improvise.” Katniss looked forward. Possibly concerned. Possibly asleep.

The second campground had space. One site. Near the bathrooms. Not ideal. Bone took it. Ideal was expensive and frequently unnecessary.

They parked. Bone stepped out. Listened. Children. Doors. Someone cooking. A radio somewhere. Not loud. Busy. Different from the previous night.

Blaze liked it immediately. People. Smells. Possibilities. Bone shortened the leash. “Absolutely not.”

Katniss stayed inside. Noise. Too much activity. Bone noticed. Did not force her out.

He opened the side windows. Set water. Food. Let her watch.

Blaze and Bone walked the campground loop. Training. Short. Bone used it as practice. People. Dogs. Bikes. Children. Food smells. Blaze did well. Not perfect. Good.

A small dog barked at him. Blaze stopped. Looked. Then at Bone. "Good." They continued.

A hamburger fell from somebody's plate two campsites away. Blaze saw it. Bone saw Blaze see it. "No." Blaze looked at Bone. Then the hamburger. Then Bone. "Leave it." Long pause. Blaze walked on. Bone stared. "That's maturity." Blaze's tail moved. "Or tragedy."

Back at the van, Katniss was sitting in the open doorway. Watching. Bone sat on the step beside her. Blaze lay down.

A little girl from the neighboring site saw Katniss. She approached slowly. Parent with her. Good. "Can I pet her?" Bone looked at Katniss. Katniss looked at the child. "That's up to her." The child stopped a few feet away. Waited. Katniss remained.

The child held out one finger. Katniss leaned forward. Sniffed. Then rubbed her cheek against it. The child smiled so widely Bone almost laughed.

"What's her name?" "Katniss." "Is she yours?" Bone opened his mouth. Stopped. The child's parent smiled. Bone looked at Katniss. Katniss rubbed against the child's hand again. Then returned to Bone.

Bone sighed. "She travels with us." The parent nodded. The child seemed satisfied. They left.

Bone sat still. Blaze's tail moved. Bone looked at him. "Not one word." Thunk.

That was the first time. Not my cat. Not ownership. Something easier. She travels with us. True. Enough.

Dinner came. Katniss eventually came outside. The campground quieted slowly. Children disappeared into tents. Radios stopped. Doors closed. Darkness spread.

Bone read. Blaze slept. Katniss sat on the roof. Again. Bone had now watched how she got up. Bench. Counter. Window edge. Roof. Entirely too confident.

He looked up. "You know that's not an approved travel position." Katniss looked at the stars. "Fine."

The sky wasn't as dark as the previous night's. Campground lights. Other fires. Still good.

Bone didn't photograph the van. He already had that. Instead he watched. People settling. Lanterns. Families talking quietly. Someone washing dishes. A couple walking a dog. A child whispering from inside a tent.

Bone thought about Ray's property. The evenings there had become crowded too. People arriving. Food. Stories. Laughter. At the time, Bone had thought the property changed. Maybe he had.

Blaze lifted his head. Something moved near the edge of camp. Raccoon. Bone saw it. “Leave it.” Blaze stayed. Good. Katniss saw it from the roof. Her entire body changed. Bone stood. “Absolutely not.” Katniss crouched. “Katniss.” Tail twitch. “No.”

The raccoon disappeared. Katniss remained focused. Bone climbed onto the step. “Come down.” Nothing. “Do not make me retrieve you.” Nothing.

Bone considered the geometry. Rejected it. He was not climbing onto the roof after a cat at night. There were limits.

He took out her food. Katniss looked down. Bone smiled. “You’re predictable too.” She descended. Bone clipped her harness line properly. “Victory.” Katniss ate.

Later, inside the van, Bone reorganized. Again. Travel changed storage almost immediately. The camera needed easier access. Blaze’s food needed to move. Water was fine. Books were not. One had fallen during the climb earlier. Ray would have enjoyed that.

Katniss investigated every open cabinet. Bone moved her from two. Blocked a third. She entered a fourth. “How many cabinets do you need?” No answer.

Blaze lay in his space. Watching. Bone shifted one small crate. Moved the camera bag. Re-secured the books. Then stood back. Better. Slightly.

He looked at Blaze. Then Katniss. “Room for three.” Katniss climbed into the empty crate. Bone stared. “Apparently not.”

He laughed. Quietly. Unexpected.

Sleep came later. Blaze on the floor. Katniss eventually beside Bone. Not on the chair. Progress.

Bone lay awake briefly. Not worried. Listening. Campground. Wind. Van cooling. Blaze breathing. Katniss purring.

No Ray. No destination. No urgency.

He had always assumed traveling together meant giving up some freedom. Maybe it did. He stopped more. Waited longer. Carried different things. Chose roads partly because Blaze could handle them. Chose camps partly because Katniss needed quieter places.

But there were things he’d gained too. Someone noticed when he left. Someone waited when he returned. Someone stole his chair. Someone occupied most of the floor.

Bone looked into the darkness. “Terrible arrangement.” Blaze’s tail moved once. Thunk. Katniss purred. Bone smiled. “Exactly.”

Morning would bring another road. Maybe another town. Maybe rain. Maybe nothing interesting at all. Bone liked that possibility. Nothing had

to happen. They were already going somewhere. Even if none of them knew where. And for now, the Volkswagen had just enough room for three.

CHAPTER 24

The Places Between

The campground emptied before I did. This was not unusual. People who traveled with schedules tended to leave early. People who traveled with children tended to leave loudly. People who traveled with large dogs and opinionated cats left when everybody had finished disagreeing with breakfast. That took longer.

Blaze ate. Katniss inspected her food. Looked at mine. Inspected hers again. Then ate as though this had been her decision from the beginning. I drank coffee. Progress. Packing took almost no time. Still suspicious. Chair folded. Bowls washed. Water checked. Camera stored. Book returned to the shelf. Blaze secured. Katniss harnessed. Katniss complained. Not vocally. She had discovered a more sophisticated method. She became completely rigid. I looked at her. “You know you can still move.” Nothing. “You moved yesterday.” Nothing. Blaze watched from his travel space. “Do not encourage her.” His tail moved once. Thunk.

I lifted Katniss. She remained rigid. “This is impressive.” I placed her on the passenger bench. She stared forward. “You’re making a statement.” Nothing. “Unfortunately I don’t speak statue.” We left around nine. West. Mostly. The road followed the hills. Then a river. Then neither. Small highways had a habit of changing their minds. I respected that.

Morning light came through broken clouds. Blaze watched the world through the side window. Katniss watched approximately seven minutes. Then fell asleep. Apparently freedom was exhausting. I drove slower than traffic preferred. Not dangerously. Just old-Volkswagen slow. Cars passed. Most without comment. One driver waved. I waved back. Another gave me a gesture that was considerably less welcoming. I waved at him too. That seemed to upset him more. Good.

The van ran well. Or well enough. Temperature steady. Oil pressure good. No new noises. Only old noises I was beginning to recognize. Cabinet rattle. Door whistle. Something near the rear that clicked twice whenever we hit a certain kind of bump. I had checked it. Nothing

loose. Probably. Probably was becoming an uncomfortable part of vehicle ownership.

An hour into the drive, I saw a sign. HISTORIC DISTRICT NEXT RIGHT I turned. No thought required. Katniss woke. Blaze stood. "History." Neither seemed impressed. The road led into a town that had once been larger. You could tell. Not because of ruins. Because of buildings. Two-story brick storefronts along a street that no longer had enough businesses to fill them. A theater with a faded marquee. A bank converted into something else. An old hotel with upstairs windows dark behind curtains. A hardware store. Of course. Apparently every town had one.

I parked near a small public square. Checked signs. Legal. Good. Blaze came out first. Katniss waited. Then followed. Less hesitation. That mattered. The square had a memorial. Not military. Mining. A bronze plaque listed names. A small ore cart sat beside it. Not decorative originally. Real. Worn. Rusting.

I read. The town had grown around logging first. Then a mineral strike nearby brought a short boom. Not gold. Something less romantic and therefore probably more useful. The plaque mentioned copper. A railroad spur followed. Then decline. Roads changed. Industry moved. The town remained. Mostly. I liked that word. Mostly. Towns were often mostly themselves. People too.

Blaze sniffed the ore cart. "No." He looked at me. "I don't know what's on that." He sniffed the ground instead. Better. Katniss jumped onto the low stone border around the memorial. I shortened her leash. "Respect." She sat. Fine.

Across the square was a small historical museum. Open. That presented a familiar problem. Animals. I looked at Blaze. Then Katniss. Then the museum. "No." Katniss looked at the door. "Absolutely not." Blaze sat. At least one of them understood civilization.

A woman came outside. Late sixties, maybe. Volunteer badge. She looked at me. Then Blaze. Then Katniss. Then back at me. "You traveling with both?" "Apparently." She smiled. "I've seen stranger." I looked at myself. "That's encouraging." I explained that I wanted to look inside but couldn't leave either animal unattended. She nodded. "Wait here." She went back inside. Returned carrying a binder. "You like history?" "Unfortunately." "Good." She sat on a bench. I sat on the other end. Blaze lay between us. Katniss climbed onto the backrest. Of course.

Her name was Helen. She had lived there fifty-two years. Which meant she did not answer questions briefly. Excellent. The binder contained copies. Newspaper clippings. Maps. Old photographs. Rail schedules. Mine records. Flood reports. I asked what she thought mattered

most. That surprised her. “What do you mean?” “About the town.” She looked toward the street. Long time. Then: “The road moved.” I waited.

She pointed to an old map. “Highway used to come straight through.” Then another. “New route went around us.” “When?” “Sixties.” She tapped the map. “Before that, everybody stopped here.” “Fuel?” “Food. Hotel. Repairs. Supplies.” She smiled. “Trouble.” “Important service.” “Very.”

When the new highway bypassed town, traffic disappeared. Businesses closed. Some buildings survived because nobody could afford to replace them. Others collapsed. A few became homes. One became the museum.

“People always talk about the mine,” Helen said. “Road mattered more?” “Road decided whether anybody came through.” That stayed with me.

I looked toward the Volkswagen. Visible across the square. Old. Faded. Different road now. Helen showed me a photograph. Main street. Probably 1940s. Cars angled along both curbs. Storefronts crowded with signs. People. Trucks. Motion. Same street outside. Almost empty.

I raised the camera. Stopped. “Can I photograph this?” She nodded. “Just don’t use flash.” I didn’t. Straight reference shot. Then another. No art. Just record. Helen pointed toward a building at the far end of the block. “Old hotel.” “Still open?” “No.” “Inside?” “Mostly storage.” “Mostly?” “Owner lives upstairs.” There it was again.

She told me a story about a traveling salesman who had lived there for six months because his car broke down during winter. Then married the hotel owner’s daughter. Never left. I smiled. “That sounds suspiciously convenient.” “That’s because half of it probably isn’t true.” “Which half?” “Depends who tells it.” Perfect. I wrote that down.

The conversation lasted forty minutes. Maybe an hour. Blaze slept. Katniss relocated from the bench to my lap without permission. Helen noticed. “Your cat likes you.” “That remains disputed.” Katniss purred. Helen looked at me. “Not very successfully.”

Before we left, Helen pointed toward a narrow road behind town. “Old highway.” “Still passable?” “For a bit.” “Public?” “Yes.” “Ends?” “Eventually.” I smiled. “Good.” We drove it. Not far. The pavement narrowed almost immediately. Cracks. Grass in places. Trees reclaiming shoulders. Old telephone poles. Some still standing. Some leaning.

The road ended at a barricade near an old bridge approach. Bridge gone. River below. New highway crossing farther downstream. I parked. Blaze out. Katniss out. Both harnessed. The old road simply stopped. Not dramatically. No cliff. No ruin. Just pavement leading to concrete where

a bridge had once continued. Beyond that, air. River. Trees. I stood there. Camera in hand. Didn't take a picture. Not yet.

I thought about Helen. The road moved. Not physically. Importance moved. People followed. Buildings stayed. Memory adjusted. Blaze walked to the edge of his leash. Sniffed. Katniss sat on a broken concrete barrier. Wind moved her whiskers. I framed the old approach. Too obvious. Lowered camera. Walked sideways. Included weeds. Cracked pavement. One surviving white line. New highway faint in distance. Better.

Waited. Clouds moved. No dramatic light. Fine. A truck crossed the new highway. Tiny in the frame. Old road foreground. New road background. Movement where movement had gone. Click. I checked. Keeper. Maybe one of the better ones. Blaze sniffed my hand. "Yes." Tail. "Good road."

We stayed another twenty minutes. Katniss watched the river. Blaze watched Katniss. I watched both. Then something happened. Nothing important. A leaf blew across the pavement. Katniss chased it. Three feet. Stopped. Looked embarrassed. I laughed. She looked at me. "Sorry." I wasn't.

We drove back through town. Helen waved from the museum bench. I waved back. She pointed at the van. Then gave a thumbs-up. I assumed approval. Possibly concern. We continued west. By early afternoon, I needed fuel. The Volkswagen needed fuel more than I did. Old vans were not subtle about consumption.

I found a station outside another small town. Pulled in. Immediately became the most interesting thing there. Not me. The van. This was new. A man at the next pump looked over. "Sixty-seven?" I looked at the Volkswagen. "Approximately." He laughed. "What year?" I told him what Ray had told me. He walked closer. "Original paint?" "Mostly." "Don't repaint it." I smiled. "You're the third person." "Then three people are right."

He asked if I restored it. "No." "Bought it?" "Complicated." "Best kind." Then Blaze appeared in the window. The man stepped back. "That's a dog." "Yes." "Big dog." "Also yes." Katniss appeared beside him. The man stared. "And a cat." I closed my eyes. "Apparently." He laughed. "You've got a circus." "I have transportation problems."

We talked Volkswagens for several minutes. He had owned one in college. Of course. Everybody had either owned one or knew someone who had. I was beginning to suspect the entire country had shared twelve Volkswagens and simply passed them around. He told me his had caught fire. That was less comforting.

“Fuel line,” he said. I stared. “Already replaced.” “Good.” “Repeatedly warned.” “Better.”

I finished fueling. Checked beneath the van. Nothing. Good. At the convenience store, another problem. I needed food. Animals couldn’t come inside. Too warm to leave them closed in the van. So I parked in shade. Opened appropriate ventilation. Stayed close. Went inside quickly. Bought food. Returned. Normal. Responsible. Boring. Excellent.

Katniss was sitting in my seat. Of course. I opened the door. “Move.” She did not. I picked her up. She allowed it. I sat. Put her on the passenger side. She returned to my lap. I looked down. “We are parked.” Purr. “That does not establish precedent.” Purr. Blaze watched. “Not one word.”

We ate lunch at a county park outside town. Nothing scenic enough to advertise. Grass. Trees. Ball field. Picnic tables. Public restrooms. Perfect. Blaze discovered a tennis ball near a fence. Abandoned. Bright yellow. Old. He froze. I knew that look. “No.” He looked at me. Then the ball. Then me.

I walked over. Checked. Nobody nearby. The ball was cracked. Dirty. Probably lost weeks ago. I kicked it gently. Blaze exploded. Not dangerous. Just joy. He chased. Returned. Almost. Dropped it six feet away.

“Bring it.” He picked it up. Walked halfway. Dropped. Looked at me. “That is not fetch.” Tail.

Katniss sat on the picnic table. Watching the entire event with deep concern for the species. We played ten minutes. Enough. Blaze panting. Happy. I took the ball. He stared. “Break.” He stared harder. “Hydration.” Still. “Veterinarian.” That had no effect. Water. Rest. Shade. Good.

I took a photograph of him afterward. Not action. Blaze lying in grass. Tennis ball between paws. Tongue out. Eyes half closed. Katniss blurred in background on table. Click. Keeper. Obviously. The road continued. Afternoon became quieter. Fewer towns. More trees. I started seeing signs for the coast. Not near. Closer. That was enough.

Ocean had always felt different from rivers. Rivers went somewhere. Ocean was already there. I liked both for opposite reasons. Blaze had never seen the ocean. Probably. Katniss? Impossible to know. I considered going directly. Rejected it. Too late in the day. No reason to rush.

I found a small state recreation area inland. Campground half empty. Forest. A creek nearby. Pet rules clear. Good. Site near the back. Quiet. Katniss approved immediately by exiting the van without being carried. Progress. Blaze approved by trying to enter the creek. “Wait.” He stopped. Barely. I checked access. Safe section. Shallow. Leash. Fine. “Okay.”

Blaze entered the water with the dignity of a boulder falling downhill. Splash. Water everywhere. He attacked the current. The current remained unaffected. Katniss stood on a dry rock. One paw lifted. Horrified. Blaze splashed again. Katniss retreated. I laughed. “Different travel styles.” He emerged soaked. Approached. “No.” He shook. Too late. I was wet. Camera safe. Important priorities.

Katniss looked at me. I looked at Blaze. “You did that.” He looked delighted. Camp that night felt easier. Second campground. Then third. Routine developing. Water. Food. Harness checks. Gear. Chair. Book. No tent. I still noticed that.

Katniss claimed the chair before I opened it fully. I stared. “How?” She settled. I sat on the step. Again. I read Martha’s book. Blaze slept beneath the van awning. Katniss slept in my chair. The creek moved in darkness nearby.

Later, an owl called. Katniss woke instantly. Blaze did not. I looked at her. “No.” She remained focused. “That is much larger than you think.” Still. Another call. Farther. Katniss’s ears moved. I considered the camera. Low light. Probably not. I left it. Some sounds didn’t need pictures.

The night cooled. I moved inside. Blaze took his space. Katniss took approximately four spaces while weighing a fraction of what Blaze did. Physics remained unfair. I opened the map. Coast tomorrow. Maybe. The road line reached west. Blue beyond. Ocean. I traced it with one finger. Katniss stepped onto the map. Sat directly over the coastline. I looked at her. “Helpful.”

She began washing her shoulder. I moved the map. She stepped onto it again. “Personal?” Nothing. Blaze’s tail hit the cabinet. Thunk. I folded the map. “Fine.” Before sleeping, I checked the photographs. Old road. Rusty guardrail. Blaze with tennis ball. Ordinary things. Good.

Then I reached the old-road photograph. Cracked pavement in foreground. Missing bridge. New highway behind. Truck moving across it. I looked longer. Roads did not disappear just because people stopped using them. They became something else. History. Memory. Shortcut. Dead end. Photograph.

Maybe people did too. Not disappear. Change purpose. Ray’s Volkswagen had. Ray had. I had. Blaze definitely had. Katniss appeared to refuse the entire concept of purpose. Probably healthier. I closed the camera. Lights off. In darkness, I heard Katniss move. Then felt her settle beside me. Blaze breathed below. Creek outside. Van cooling.

I thought about the old road. The highway that replaced it. The town bypassed. The museum that remained. The people who stayed. I had spent years believing travel was mostly about destinations connected by roads. Maybe the roads themselves were only part of it. There were

also the places between. The towns bypassed. The turnoffs nobody planned. The bridges gone. The benches where somebody talked too long. The county parks where a dog found a ruined tennis ball. The campsites chosen because the first one was full.

Things that happened because I wasn't in a hurry. Katniss shifted. One paw landed against my ribs. I moved it. She put it back. "Negotiation?" Purr. I left it. Tomorrow we might reach the coast. Or we might not. Something else could be along the way. That was the advantage of not knowing. The road had room to surprise us. And increasingly, so did I.

CHAPTER 25

Salt in the Air

The road smelled different before I saw the ocean. That surprised me. Not because salt air was mysterious. Because I had expected some dramatic announcement. A horizon. A cliff. A sudden impossible blue. Instead: Damp wind. Cold. A faint mineral smell. Something clean and old. Blaze noticed first. Of course. His head lifted from the back. Nose working. Tail beginning. Thunk. Katniss opened one eye. I looked toward the windshield. “Ocean.” Blaze stood. Katniss closed her eye. Different priorities.

The road descended through trees. Not steep. Enough. More openings between branches. Brighter sky. Then gulls. One crossed above the road. Blaze saw it. “Leave it.” He looked at me. The gull continued. “Excellent.” The first glimpse came between two buildings. Small. Gray. Flat. Then gone. I almost laughed. “That’s it?” Blaze looked confused. Katniss remained asleep.

I had been to oceans before. Different coasts. Different weather. Different versions of the same enormous thing. But arriving always did something. Maybe because oceans refused scale. Mountains could be measured. Rivers had banks. Roads had destinations. Ocean simply continued.

I pulled into a public overlook. Legal parking. Dogs allowed on leash. Cats technically not prohibited. That had become an alarming category of travel planning. I stopped the engine. Silence. Then wind. Stronger here. Blaze stood immediately. Katniss sat up. Her ears flattened slightly. I looked at her. “New.” She looked toward the side window. The ocean filled it.

For once, Katniss did not immediately try to get out. Interesting. I opened the side door. Blaze waited. Barely. “Wait.” He vibrated. “Wait.” Still. “Okay.” He jumped down. Sniffed. Then froze. Not fear. Overload. Wind. Salt. Birds. Water. So much water.

His nose moved constantly. He looked toward the ocean. Then at me. Then ocean. Then me. “Yes.” Tail. “That’s a lot.” More tail. Katniss remained inside. I clipped her harness. Waited. She stepped to the doorway. Wind hit her. She backed up. Reasonable.

“No rush.” She stared outside. Blaze returned to the van. He sniffed her. Katniss looked offended. Then stepped forward again.

One paw. Two. Ground. She crouched. Wind moved her fur. Her tail went low. Not tucked. Careful. I stayed close. No pulling. No carrying unless necessary. She needed to decide how much world she wanted. A gull cried overhead. Katniss looked up so fast I heard the harness ring click. “No.” She remained still. “Good.”

We walked only as far as the overlook railing. Blaze first. Katniss beside me. Short lead. The ocean was gray-blue under heavy clouds. White lines of surf. Dark rocks. No postcard sunset. Better. Blaze reached the railing. Sniffed the wind. Then sneezed. I smiled. “Strong review.” He sneezed again. Katniss sat. Stared. Not at the water. At birds. Of course.

I took out the camera. Then stopped. Too obvious. Ocean. Dog. Cat. Beautiful. So what? I lowered it. A family nearby took pictures. Selfies. Children pointing. Someone shouting over the wind. Fine. I waited. Blaze eventually lay down. Still watching the waves. Katniss moved closer to the railing. Not much. Enough.

Then a wave struck the rocks below. Spray rose. Light caught it. Not sunlight. Just brightness through clouds. For half a second the spray became white against dark water. Blaze lifted his head. Katniss’s ears went forward. Click.

I checked. Not centered. Good. Spray. Ocean. Blaze low in frame. Katniss just visible at the edge. Keeper. We stayed twenty minutes. Maybe thirty. Blaze never stopped smelling. Katniss never stopped watching birds. I never stopped looking. Then I said: “Beach?” Blaze stood. Katniss looked at me. “That was not directed at you.” She remained suspicious.

The beach access was farther south. Public. Dogs allowed on leash. Wide. Cold. Windy. Perfect. I parked. Checked everything. Always. Blaze knew something important was happening. He danced at the side door. Not ideal. “Wait.” He stopped. “Good.” Barely.

Katniss watched from inside. I looked at her. “You can stay.” That felt important. Not every experience had to be shared. She curled on the bench. Decision made. Blaze and I walked toward the sand. His first step onto it stopped him. He looked down. Sniffed. Took another. Sand shifted. He looked offended.

“Different ground.” He tested it. One paw. Two. Then understood something. And ran. Not free. Leash still attached. Which meant I ran too. This was not my plan.

"Blaze." He accelerated. "Blaze." More enthusiasm. "Easy." Eventually.

The first wave reached us. Small. Ankle deep. Blaze jumped backward. I laughed. He stared at the water. The water retreated. Blaze followed.

"No." Too late. Next wave came. Blaze charged it.

Splash. Massive. He bit water. The ocean won. Immediately. Blaze emerged coughing. Then went back. Of course. I stood farther up the beach. Leash secure. Watching a hundred seventeen pounds of dog challenge the Pacific. This seemed like something Ray would have appreciated.

Wave. Blaze attacked. Wave. Blaze retreated. Wave. Blaze attacked again. A complicated relationship developed. I took photographs. Several. Most terrible. Water on lens. Dog blurred. Leash awkward. One had only Blaze's rear half. Art. Then I stopped trying. Waited.

Blaze stood in shallow water. Wind pushing his coat. Wave behind. Not charging. Just watching. Another wave rolled in. He stayed. Water around legs. Tail high. Click. I checked. Keeper. Definitely. We walked farther. Not much. Enough. Driftwood. Shell fragments. Dark stones. Foam.

I picked up a small piece of smooth wood. Looked at it. Put it back. Pack already had one rock with emotional significance. That was enough. Blaze found something dead. Of course. "Leave it." He stopped. Looked at me. Then at it. Then back. "Excellent." Progress. We returned to the van wet. Mostly Blaze. Some me.

Katniss sat in the passenger seat. Looking smug. "Your choice was correct." She washed one paw. I towel-dried Blaze. He attempted to eat the towel. "Traditions survive." The van now smelled like wet dog and ocean. Wonderful.

We ate lunch in the parking area. Wind too strong outside. Blaze lay on his bed. Katniss stole the passenger seat. I ate a sandwich. For a while, nobody did anything. Ocean visible through glass. Condensation beginning at one corner. Blaze asleep. Katniss awake. Watching gulls.

I took Martha's book from the shelf. Read one page. Stopped. Not because the book was bad. Because the ocean was there. Some competition is unreasonable. I put the book down. A knock came at the open side door. Older man. Rain jacket. Gray beard. Camera around neck. I looked up. "Nice bus." "Thanks." "Yours?" I paused. "Yes." That still felt strange.

He smiled. "What year?" I told him. He leaned slightly. "Original paint?" "Mostly." "Good." Apparently there was a national committee. He noticed Blaze. Then Katniss. "Traveling circus." "I've heard." We

talked cameras. That happened faster than van talk. He shot landscapes. Mostly coast. Storms. Birds. Occasional fishing boats.

"Good light today," he said. I looked outside. Gray. Flat. Wind. "Maybe." He smiled. "Exactly."

His name was Graham. He told me a headland farther south sometimes caught evening light under storm clouds. "Sometimes?" "Usually not." "Excellent." He showed me a few images on his camera. Strong. Not flashy. One of a fishing boat in rain. Mostly gray. Tiny red buoy. Good.

"You wait a lot," I said. "Most of photography is waiting." "I've noticed." "Second most is walking somewhere and deciding the light's wrong." "Also noticed."

Graham looked at my camera. "You shoot people?" "Sometimes." "Animals?" I looked at Blaze. "Against my will." Blaze's tail moved. Katniss ignored us. Graham left. I wrote down the headland. No commitment. We continued south. Coastal road. Ocean appearing and disappearing. Cliffs. Trees. Small towns. Motels. Seafood signs. Gift shops. Closed businesses. New businesses pretending to be old. Old businesses pretending not to notice time.

Blaze slept. Katniss watched. I stopped in one town because of a bookstore. Of course. Used books. Hand-painted sign. Tiny. Problem. Animals. Again. I parked in shade. Cool day. Ventilation. Quick visit. Everything safe. Inside smelled like paper and dust. Perfect.

I traded Martha's book. Almost. Then stopped. Too soon. I hadn't finished it. Bad habit. Instead, I found a thin book about regional coastal history. Bought it. This was not helping. The owner noticed my camera. "Photographer?" "Sometimes." "Storm coming." "I heard." "Good sunsets after storms." "Sometimes." She nodded. "Exactly." Everybody was apparently collaborating now.

Back at the van, Katniss was sitting in my seat. Again. "Move." She did not. I sighed. I bought fuel. Checked oil. Checked tires. Listened to engine. Good. By mid-afternoon clouds thickened. Dark offshore. Wind stronger. Not dangerous yet. Just weather arriving.

I thought about Graham's headland. Then the campground. Then weather. Photography was never worth ignoring safety. I checked forecast at a stop where I had signal. Rain later. Wind stronger overnight. No severe warning. Good. Headland first. Camp before dark. Reasonable.

We reached it around four. Public viewpoint. Trail short. Dogs allowed on leash. Katniss? Unknown experience. I looked at her. She looked at wind moving bushes. "No." Decision mutual. She stayed in the van in a safe, ventilated setup while I remained nearby with Blaze. Cool temperature. Short outing. Good.

Blaze and I walked the path. Wind hard enough to move his coat sideways. He loved it. I did not. At the viewpoint, ocean stretched beneath dark clouds. Sun hidden. Flat. Gray. Graham had been optimistic. I waited. Five minutes. Ten. Fifteen. Blaze sat. Then lay down. Nothing. A couple arrived. Looked. Left. Another person took three pictures and left.

Twenty-five minutes. Wind colder. Still nothing. I considered leaving. Then the cloud layer changed. A thin gap formed near horizon. Not bright. Barely. I waited. The sun found it. Not full. A narrow band. Gold-orange under dark clouds. Ocean changed. Gray became silver. Then bronze. Rocks became black. I raised the camera. Too fast. Lowered. Looked.

Blaze stood beside me. Silhouette. Wind. Ocean. Light under storm. Click. Another. Then gone. Less than a minute. I checked. First image too dark. Second better. Third. Blaze at edge. Not dominant. Ocean huge. Band of light. Clouds heavy. Keeper. One of the best. I smiled. “Worth waiting.” Blaze looked at me. Tail.

We returned to the van. Katniss was asleep. She had missed nothing she cared about. Rain began ten minutes later. Good timing. I found a campground inland enough to be sheltered. Trees. Wind quieter. Rain steady. Site muddy. Fine.

I parked. Opened door. Blaze looked outside. Then at me. “Yes. Rain.” Tail. “Of course.” Katniss looked outside. Then stayed inside. Also reasonable. I set only what was necessary. No chair. No stove outside. Dinner inside. Rain on metal roof. Different sound. Steady. Comforting until you remembered you were inside an old Volkswagen. Then slightly less comforting. I checked for leaks. One. Small. Near side window. Of course.

Towel. Temporary. Add to list. Blaze slept. Wet again. Katniss chose the driest possible location. My pillow. “No.” She stared. “That is mine.” Purr. I moved her. She returned.

“Fine.”

I ate. Read part of the coastal history book. Good. Logging towns. Fishing ports. Rail lines. Storms. Shipwrecks. Changes in roads and harbors. Places reinventing themselves when old industries faded. Familiar theme. Outside, rain strengthened. I checked photographs. Beach. Blaze in water. Headland. The headland photograph stopped me. Dark cloud. Thin horizon light. Blaze. Ocean. Not cheerful. Good.

I thought of Ray. He would complain that Blaze was too small in frame. Laura would like it. Michael would ask whether the van was still running. Evan would probably notice something I hadn’t. Tom would ask about engine temperature.

I missed them. That was new. Not enough to turn around. Enough to notice. Katniss shifted on my pillow. Blaze snored below. I opened my notebook. Wrote: Ocean. Blaze attempted to fight it. Outcome inconclusive. Then: First real storm-light photograph with the van trip. Then stopped.

I almost wrote something about arriving. Didn't. The coast wasn't an ending. Just another place. Rain moved across the roof. Katniss purred. Blaze snored. The van held. Mostly. I thought about the road behind. Ray's farm. Historic town. Old highway. County park. Creek. Campgrounds. Now ocean. None of them had been destinations until we arrived.

Maybe that was the point. A destination was often just a place you decided to stop long enough to notice. I closed the notebook. Sometime later, the rain softened. I opened the side door slightly. Cool wet air. Salt faint even this far inland. Katniss lifted her head. Blaze did not.

I looked into darkness. Ocean somewhere beyond trees. Road somewhere beyond that. More towns. More weather. More places between. No plan. Still. Good. I closed the door. Turned off the light. Katniss moved from my pillow to my chest. Progress in the wrong direction. I looked at her outline. "No." Purr. Blaze's tail hit the cabinet. Thunk. I smiled in the dark. "Room for three." Purr. Thunk. Rain.

Outside, the ocean continued doing what it had done long before any road reached it. Inside, three travelers slept beside a road that would continue in the morning. That was enough.

CHAPTER 26

What the Storm Leaves

The rain stopped before sunrise. I knew because the roof stopped talking. For most of the night, the Volkswagen had sounded like somebody throwing handfuls of rice at a metal shed. Then gradually: Less. Less. Nothing. I opened my eyes. Dark. Blaze breathing below. Katniss somewhere near my ribs. I moved one hand. Found fur. Wrong animal. Katniss. Blaze was too large to mistake. Usually.

I waited. No rain. Then one drop hit the roof. Another. Pause. Nothing. “Negotiating?” Katniss purred. “Not you.” Morning came gray. Not gloomy. Clean. Everything outside the windows looked rinsed. Tree bark darker. Needles shining. Mud where dirt had been. Small streams running beside the campground road.

Blaze woke when I opened the side door. His head appeared immediately. He looked outside. Wet. Cold. Excellent. His tail started. “No.” Tail faster. “Breakfast first.” Blaze looked at the rain-darkened ground. Then at me. “Society has rules.”

Katniss remained inside. She had learned something Blaze had not. Wet ground remained wet even when viewed enthusiastically. I made coffee under the awning. Checked the leak. Still there. Small. The towel beneath the window had done its job. Mostly. I added: Window seal. to the repair list. The list was getting longer. Not alarmingly. Just honestly. Old vehicles did that. You drove them. They introduced themselves.

Blaze ate. Katniss ate. I ate. Nobody attempted theft. A suspiciously mature breakfast. Then Blaze walked directly into a puddle deep enough to soak both front legs. Balance restored. We left after eight. The coastal road was wet. Fog caught in the trees. Not heavy enough to hide anything. Enough to soften edges.

The ocean appeared occasionally through openings. Gray water. Gray sky. White surf. Everything reduced to texture. I liked it. Katniss sat upright longer today. Not asleep. Watching. Road. Trees. Occasional buildings. She seemed less bothered by movement. Still unhappy with the harness. But unhappiness had become routine rather than catastrophe. Progress.

Blaze watched the ocean whenever it appeared. He remembered. That was clear. Every glimpse produced interest. Not full excitement. Recognition. I looked in the mirror. “You’re not fighting it again today.” Blaze’s ears lifted. “No.” The road curved inland. Then back. Small houses appeared. Fishing boats in yards. Stacked crab pots. Sheds. Old trucks. New trucks. Buildings painted in colors I could not reliably name and therefore did not try. Colorblindness had taught me humility. Also arguments with paint samples.

A handwritten sign appeared near the road. HARBOR 2 MILES I turned. Of course. The harbor was small. Working. Not picturesque in the deliberate sense. Better. Boats. Diesel. Salt. Rope. Wood. Metal. Birds. Men carrying things. Women carrying things. Nobody posing for tourists.

I parked near a public waterfront area. Checked signs. Dogs allowed on leash. Good. Katniss? No sign specifically addressed cats. Once again, civilization had failed to anticipate us. Blaze stepped out. Nose immediately overwhelmed. Fish. Birds. Water. Boats. People. Unknown things. Probably more fish.

“Easy.” He tried. Good.

Katniss stayed in the van for several minutes. Then stepped down. She noticed gulls first. Naturally. Her entire posture changed. Bone traveler. Blaze dog. Katniss missile. “No.” She stared upward. “Absolutely no.” We walked along the public path. Slow. Blaze checked every piling. Katniss checked every bird. I checked buildings. Everybody had priorities.

A harbor seal surfaced between two boats. Blaze froze. I froze. Katniss did not notice. The seal looked at us. Blaze looked at the seal. I shortened his leash. “That is not a dog.” Blaze continued staring. The seal disappeared. Blaze looked at me. “Different jurisdiction.”

A fisherman sitting on a crate laughed. “First seal?” “For him.” The man looked at Blaze. “Dog’ll figure out quick they’re not coming ashore to play.” “Good.” He looked at Katniss. Then at me. “Cat?” I sighed. “Apparently.”

His name was Leon. He had been working out of the harbor since he was seventeen. He was now seventy. Or claimed to be. He looked fifty-five until he stood. Then maybe seventy. We talked. Not because I planned to. Because Leon did.

Storm last night had been mild compared to winter. This harbor had seen docks torn loose. Boats damaged. Road flooded. Power gone for days.

“People romanticize storms,” he said. “I photograph them.” “Same disease.” “Possibly.” He smiled.

I asked about the harbor. Oldest building. Boat ramp. Breakwater. The cannery that used to operate farther down. A fire years ago. A rebuilding. Different owners. Different industries. Same working waterfront.

“Used to be more fishing,” Leon said. “Now?” “Still fishing.” He shrugged. “Different.”

That word again. Different. Not gone. Different. Leon pointed toward a weathered building near the far end. “Old net shed.” “Still used?” “Storage.” “Mostly?” He looked at me. “Mostly.” I smiled. “Apparently that’s a regional measurement.” He looked confused. I decided not to explain.

A boat came in. Small commercial boat. Crew moving immediately. Ropes. Boxes. No drama. Work. I raised the camera. Then lowered it. Private enough. Busy enough. Not mine. Leon noticed. “Didn’t take it.” “No.” “Why?” “They’re working.” “So?” “Didn’t ask.” He nodded. “Good.” That was all.

A gull landed on the railing three feet from Katniss. This became a crisis. Not for the gull. For me. Katniss crouched. Tail twitching. Gull stared. Blaze noticed Katniss. Then gull. Then Katniss. Then me. Everyone waiting to see who made the worst decision.

“Katniss.” Nothing. “Leave it.” Still. “That works on Blaze.” Blaze sat. Show-off.

The gull took one step closer. Katniss’s rear legs compressed. “No.” The gull screamed. Katniss jumped straight up. Not toward it. Just up. Then landed. Blaze barked once. The gull flew away. Leon laughed so hard he nearly fell off the crate.

Katniss looked around. Offended. I looked at Blaze. “Nobody saw that.” Blaze panted. Leon wiped his eyes. “I saw it.” “You don’t count.” We walked farther. The path ended near rocks protecting the harbor entrance. Wind stronger there. Ocean visible beyond.

A fishing boat crossed the opening. Dark hull. White wake. Gray sea. Heavy clouds. I took the camera. Waited. Boat moved. Gulls followed. Not enough. Then a patch of brighter sky opened behind it. No sun. Just contrast. Boat became silhouette. Wake caught light. Gulls above. Click. Second shot. A wave hit the outer rocks. Spray. Boat farther away. Click.

I checked. First better. Keeper. Blaze sniffed my camera bag. “No.” Katniss sat beside my boot. Not watching gulls. Watching the van in the distance. Interesting. We returned after an hour. Maybe more. Leon was still there. Of course.

He looked at Blaze. “Seal?” “Survived.” “Cat?” “Debatable.” Katniss walked past him. Leon nodded. “Looks fine.” Before we left, he said: “There’s an old lighthouse south of here.” I looked at him. “Open?” “Grounds are.” “Trail?” “Short.” “Pets?” He thought. “Dog, yes outside.

Cat…" He looked at Katniss. "Never came up." Of course. I wrote it down. Not promise. Possibility.

We fueled. Again. Old Volkswagen. Frequent relationship with gas stations. At the pump, I checked oil. Good. Tires. Good. Leak? None. Window seal still bad. Not relevant to engine. Still on list. We continued south. The storm had left debris. Small branches. Needles. Occasional standing water. Nothing serious.

Then I saw something larger. A tree limb across part of the shoulder. Not blocking traffic. Someone had already marked it with cones. Good. Blaze saw it through the window. Tail. "Branch." Tail faster. "Not yours." Disappointment. The lighthouse road appeared near noon. Small sign. I turned. The road climbed through trees. Narrow. Wet. Then opened onto a bluff.

The lighthouse was not dramatic. Low white tower attached to an older building. Weathered. Functional-looking. I liked it immediately. Parking area nearly empty. Good. I read the posted rules. Grounds open. Buildings closed except certain hours. Dogs permitted on leash in designated outdoor areas. No mention of cats. Again.

I looked at Katniss. "We are exploiting a regulatory loophole." She looked at me. "Don't make me regret it." Wind hit hard outside. Blaze loved it. Katniss did not. She stayed near my legs. The path followed the bluff. Grass flattened by weather. Ocean below. Waves large from last night's storm. The lighthouse stood behind us. I resisted photographing it. Too obvious.

We walked. Slow. Blaze stopped at a section of grass. Sniffed. Investigated. Nothing. Probably fascinating. Katniss remained close. No attempts to explore. Wind had apparently created loyalty. At the end of the path stood an interpretive sign. I read. The lighthouse had guided vessels along a difficult stretch of coast where fog, storms, and rocky shoreline created hazards. No surprise. Still useful.

There was an old photograph. Keepers standing outside. Different building configuration. Same ocean. I took a reference shot. Then looked at the lighthouse. The storm had broken a small tree limb nearby. Not dangerous. Just lying in grass. Leaves wet. The lighthouse beyond. Clouds moving fast. I crouched. Framed through the branches. Better.

Blaze entered from left. I almost stopped him. Then he sat. Lighthouse behind. Dog in foreground. No. Too postcard. I lowered camera. Blaze looked at me. "You're too photogenic." Tail. "Problem." We waited. A squall passed offshore. Dark rain curtain over water. Lighthouse still in sunless brightness. Not dramatic color. Shape. Tone. Weather.

I moved farther back. Included more empty sky. Less building. Lighthouse small. Rain beyond. Click. I checked. Good. Keeper. Katniss

sneezed. Wind. Maybe salt. I looked down. “Strong review.” We returned to the van for lunch. Inside. Wind too strong outside. Katniss took passenger seat. Blaze took floor. I took whatever space remained.

I opened the coastal history book. Read about lighthouses. Shipwrecks. Harbors. Storms. Coastal roads. Nothing connected specifically to this place. That was fine. I didn’t need every stop to become research. Sometimes a lighthouse could just be a lighthouse. Progress.

After lunch, I looked at the map. South. More coast. Several state parks. A larger town inland. One road followed water. Another cut through forest. Blaze slept. Katniss watched me. “Vote?” Nothing. “Excellent democracy.” I chose forest. Not because of scenery. Because wind was stronger along exposed coast. Old van. Animals. No hurry.

The road inland changed everything quickly. Ocean disappeared. Trees thickened. Wind dropped. Rain smell replaced salt. The storm had been stronger here. Branches everywhere. Leaves plastered to pavement. Creeks full. I drove slower. Then came the road crew. Temporary stop. Flagger. Chainsaw noise ahead. Tree had fallen earlier. Mostly cleared. One lane open. I stopped. Engine idled. Blaze heard chainsaw. Raised head. Katniss did not care.

The flagger walked closer. Looked at the van. Then me. “Nice bus.” “Thanks.” “You’re good to wait here. Five minutes.” “Fine.” He looked through side window. Saw Blaze. “Big dog.” “Yes.” Then Katniss. Pause. “Cat?” I sighed. “Apparently.”

He laughed. “Road trip?” “Yes.” “Good crew.” I looked back. Blaze was trying to sniff the cracked window. Katniss was asleep. “Debatable.” We waited. Five minutes became twelve. No problem. I watched workers remove the last pieces of tree. Branches. Saw cuts. Wet wood. Orange cones. No photograph. Not safe. Not appropriate. Just watched. Eventually flagger waved. We moved.

The cut section of trunk sat beside the road. Fresh pale wood against dark bark. Storm had changed the landscape overnight. Not ruined it. Changed it. I thought about taking a photograph later. Didn’t. Mid-afternoon, I stopped at a small pullout beside a swollen creek. Safe parking. Public access. Blaze out. Katniss out. Weather calmer. The creek moved fast. Brownish from runoff. Branches caught against rocks. Foam. Leaves.

Not pretty. Interesting. I kept both animals far from edge. Current stronger than it looked. Blaze watched water. He wanted in. “No.” He looked at me. “Absolutely not.” Katniss looked at water. Then at me. Smart cat. I took photographs. Not many.

One branch lodged between two rocks. Water splitting around it. Leaves trapped. Then breaking free one at a time. I waited. A red leaf.

Or maybe brown. Color uncertain. Shape clear. It released. Spun. Gone. Click. I checked. Missed it. Good. Photography remained honest. Second attempt. No leaf. Third. A cluster broke free. Click. Better. Not spectacular. Keeper maybe.

Blaze found a stick. Safe one. Small. He picked it up. I let him. We walked the short trail along creek. He carried it entire way. Proud. Katniss followed. Not happily. But steadily. Harness slack more often now. That mattered.

At one point, Blaze dropped the stick. Katniss sniffed it. Blaze waited. She walked away. He picked it up again. Diplomacy. By late afternoon, I started looking for camp. The forest road rejoined the coast farther south. Wind had eased. Clouds breaking.

I found a small campground near dunes. Not directly on beach. Protected by trees. Half empty. Good. Site had sand beneath needles. Interesting. Blaze stepped out. Recognized smell. Ocean. Tail. “Not tonight.” Tail. “We already fought one ocean.” Disappointment. Katniss jumped down. No hesitation. That was new. She walked three feet. Stopped. Sniffed. Then farther. I smiled. Didn’t say anything. Some progress disliked witnesses.

Camp setup. Simple. Routine now. Chair. Katniss claimed it. Of course. I stared. “We have been traveling three days.” Purr. “You have developed property rights.” Purr. I sat on the van step. Blaze lay nearby with the stick he had carried from the creek. I looked at it. “You brought that.” Tail. “Of course.” Dinner. Quiet.

A couple at nearby site had a small campfire. Smoke drifted through trees. Someone laughed. A radio low. Ocean distant. I read. Katniss slept. Blaze chewed stick. Then I noticed the sky. Clouds were breaking west. Not enough for sunset. Maybe.

I took camera. Walked toward edge of campground. Blaze came. Katniss stayed. Her choice. A short path led to dunes. Not beach. View over grasses. Ocean beyond. Wind moved the dune grass. Clouds dark above. Small opening near horizon. Again. Storm-light habit. I waited. Blaze sat. Ten minutes. Nothing. Fifteen. Cloud gap brightened.

Then light came through. Not gold. Pale. Cold. A silver band across ocean. Grass in foreground lit along edges. I framed. No dog. Just grass. Ocean. Light. Click. Then Blaze moved into frame. Sat at edge of dune. Back to me. Watching water. I took another. Better. Of course. Keeper. We stayed until light faded. No rush.

Back at camp, Katniss was sitting on top of the Volkswagen. I stared. “How?” She looked at me. I knew how. Still. Blaze walked to the van. Katniss looked down at him. He looked up. For a few seconds they stayed like that. Large dog. Small cat. Different heights. Same vehicle. I raised

the camera. Then stopped. Already had versions. Needed something different.

Katniss jumped down. Onto the side step. Blaze moved aside. She walked past him. He followed. No picture. Better. Inside later, I checked the day's photographs. Harbor boat. Lighthouse. Creek. Dunes. The harbor photograph surprised me. Boat small. Gulls above. Light behind. Working coast. Not postcard. Good. The lighthouse photograph was quieter. Small structure. Large weather. Better.

Dune photograph with Blaze was strongest. Again. Dog ruining my landscape photography by improving it. I wrote: Blaze continues to interfere with composition. Results remain inconveniently good. Then: Katniss tolerated wind, harbor, lighthouse, creek, campground. No murders. I paused. Added: Gull incident does not count. Katniss climbed onto the notebook. I looked at her. "Objection noted." I moved it. She followed. "Why?" Purr.

Blaze lay on floor. Stick beside him. Apparently souvenir policy had expanded. I looked at stick. Then at rock in my pack. Then Ellen's compass. Then old keychain. Then photograph Evan gave me. Things worth carrying. Still. Storms left things too. Branches. Floodwater. Broken roads. Clean air. Different light.

Maybe travel was partly learning what to keep from what passed through. Not everything needed to become a souvenir. Some things only needed to be noticed. I closed the notebook. Lights off. Ocean sounded faint beyond trees. Not loud. Enough.

Katniss settled beside me. Blaze snored. The stick rolled once when the van shifted under his weight. Tomorrow south. Maybe coast. Maybe inland. Maybe somewhere nobody had mentioned. Good. I listened to the ocean. Then the wind. Then nothing. The storm had moved on. What it left behind was enough.

CHAPTER 27

The Shape of a Detour

I woke to silence. Not complete silence. Ocean somewhere beyond the trees. A bird complaining. Blaze breathing. Katniss purring against something that belonged to me. But no rain. No wind rattling the Volkswagen. No branches tapping the roof. After the last two days, silence felt suspicious.

I opened the side door. Cold air. Blue between clouds. Wet ground. The storm had finally moved far enough away to become somebody else's weather. Blaze stretched. All of him. This took time. Front legs first. Chest down. Rear end up. Then the rest. One hundred seventeen pounds of morning.

Katniss watched. She did not stretch. She simply became awake. Cats considered transitions beneath them. Breakfast went smoothly. Which worried me. Blaze ate his. Katniss ate hers. I made coffee. Nothing spilled. Nobody stole anything. No animal attempted to chase wildlife. I checked the sky. "Something's coming." Katniss washed one paw.

The stick Blaze had carried from the creek lay beside his bed. He picked it up. I stared. "Still?" Tail. "We're not taking that." Tail harder. I pointed outside. "Stick stays." Blaze looked at the stick. Then at me. Then the stick.

"Blaze." He lowered his head.

I finished packing. Closed cabinets. Checked water. Checked camera. Checked the window seal. Still bad. Checked engine. Fine. Then I opened the side door. Blaze climbed in. Stick in his mouth. I looked at him. He looked at me.

"Really." Tail.

I removed the stick. Put it outside. Blaze watched. I closed the door. Two minutes later I discovered a smaller stick under his blanket. I stared at it. He stared at me. Katniss looked out the window. Not involved.

"You planned this." Blaze panted.

The smaller stick stayed. I had lost something larger than an argument. We left the campground just after eight. South. Probably. The road ran near the coast for a while, then climbed inland. Morning sun appeared in pieces. Wet pavement flashed between shadows. Mist still hung in low places.

Katniss watched through the passenger window. She had developed a routine. First ten minutes: Alert. Suspicious. Every movement important. Next twenty: Moderately interested. After that: Sleep. Blaze's routine was simpler. See something. Become interested. See something else. Become interested in that. Repeat indefinitely. Mine was somewhere between them.

Twenty miles south, the road closed. Not completely. A sign appeared first. ROAD DAMAGE AHEAD LOCAL ACCESS ONLY Then another. DETOUR Arrow inland. I slowed. Looked at map. Road south should have continued along the coast. Storm damage, probably. No surprise.

I could have followed the marked detour. So I did. This was unusual enough to record. The detour went east. Then south. Then east again. Then apparently began reconsidering its life choices. Narrower road. Forest. Farms. A few houses. No ocean. Blaze slept. Katniss slept. I drove.

After forty minutes, I saw a sign. Not official. Hand-painted. BOOKS COFFEE MAPS Arrow left. I drove past it. Three seconds later: "No." I slowed. Turned around. Katniss woke. Blaze stood. "Detour." They had no idea what that meant. Neither did I anymore.

The building sat behind an old gas station that had not sold fuel in years. The pumps remained. Paint faded. Windows of the station covered with old posters and notices. Behind it: A small building. Former workshop, maybe. A sign above the door: THE WRONG TURN I parked. I stared at the name. "Manipulative." Katniss blinked. A chalkboard outside read: USED BOOKS COFFEE LOCAL MAPS NO PROMISES Better.

Animals presented the usual problem. Cool weather. Shade. Safe ventilation. Quick visit. I could see the van from the front windows. Fine. I secured Blaze. Katniss already curled on the passenger seat. "Behave." Neither answered. Good. The bell over the door rang when I entered. Inside: Books. More books. Shelves built from mismatched lumber. Coffee counter. Old road maps pinned to walls. Framed photographs. Postcards. A stove in one corner. Two people reading at a table. Nobody looked up. Perfect.

A man behind the counter said: "Coffee?" "Yes." "Book?" "Probably." "Map?" "Depends." He nodded. "That's how it starts." His name was Daniel. Maybe sixty. Thin. Gray hair. Glasses hanging from a cord. He poured coffee into a mug that said: I TOOK THE SCENIC ROUTE BY ACCIDENT I approved.

“What happened to the gas station?” I asked. “Road moved.” I looked at him. “Again?” He paused. “You’ve heard that before?” “Recently.”

The old highway had once passed directly in front. Then a newer route took most traffic farther west. The gas station lasted a few years. Then closed. Workshop became storage. Then books. Then coffee.

“Why books?” Daniel shrugged. “I had books.” “Strong business model.” “It’s survived twelve years.” “Proven.”

I wandered. Travel. History. Nature. Photography. Local stories. Mysteries. Cookbooks. One shelf labeled: Books Nobody Knows Where To Put I spent the most time there. I found a thin collection of old regional photographs. Reproductions. Mostly towns. Roads. Logging camps. Small harbors. No date later than 1910.

I opened it. A photograph stopped me. Not because it was good. Because of the composition. Road entering from lower left. Buildings secondary. Empty distance beyond. Place before people. I leaned closer. Caption: Survey road near the western settlements, c. 1891. Photographer unknown. Unknown. Fine. Still, something bothered me. Not recognition. Echo. A visual habit. E. Mercer.

I had not thought about Mercer in days. Not seriously. Road had gotten crowded with dog food, harnesses, engine noises, weather, cat negotiations, people. That felt healthy. I turned the page. Another photograph. River crossing. Different photographer. Different style. No connection. I closed the book. Opened again. Returned to first image.

Daniel appeared beside me. “That one’s strange.” “Why?” “Nobody knows who took half those.” “Common?” “Very.” He tapped the page. “Archives get boxes. Families donate things. Labels disappear. Somebody writes something fifty years later and suddenly that’s the truth.” I smiled. “That sounds familiar.”

“You collect old photos?” “Not exactly.” I thought about Mercer. “Maybe.”

Daniel looked at my camera. “You make new ones.” “Sometimes.” “Same problem eventually.” “What?” “Nobody knows who took them.” I looked down at the book. “Cheerful.” “Coffee’s good, though.” I bought the book. This was definitely not helping the library situation in the van.

I found two road maps. One current. One old reproduction. The old one showed roads that no longer mattered. Some still existed. Some ended. Some had been replaced. I bought that too. Then I discovered a shelf marked: TAKE ONE / LEAVE ONE Dangerous.

I had finished Martha’s book the night before. Mostly. I had reached the last pages while listening to rain. I took it from my bag. Looked at

it. Martha had threatened me over the library checkout. Technically it wasn't a library book. Still. I put it back in the bag. Not yet.

Instead, I traded a mystery I'd been carrying since before Blaze. Finished months ago. Kept because I liked it. Which violated my own system. I placed it on shelf. Took nothing. Daniel watched. "That's not how that works." "Trying something new." "Giving?" "Apparently." He nodded. "Risky."

I looked at the book once more. Then walked away. It hurt slightly. Good. Outside, Blaze was awake. Katniss still asleep. I opened the van. Blaze sniffed the new purchases. "Books." He sniffed harder. "No food." Interest ended.

Katniss opened one eye. I held up the old map. "Useful." She closed eye. I stored the books. This required moving three other things. Then two more. Then discovering that Katniss had been sleeping on a folded towel I needed. The van had become a three-dimensional argument about priorities.

Daniel came outside carrying his coffee. He looked at the Volkswagen. "Long trip?" "Maybe." "Where?" "South." "How far?" I considered. "Yes." He smiled. "Good answer." He pointed down the detour road. "Don't follow the state signs all the way." I looked at him. "That sounds dangerous." "Not dangerous." "Worse?" "Boring."

He explained there was an older county road that rejoined the detour farther south. Paved. Public. Maintained. Slower. Passed through a valley. Old mill town. Covered bridge nearby. Small grocery. Then reconnect.

"Road okay for this?" I pointed at van. Daniel looked at it. "Define okay." "No." He laughed. "Yes. It's fine."

I checked my current map. Road existed. Good.

"Anything closed?" "Not unless last night's storm did something." "Helpful." "That's all I've got."

I thanked him. He looked through open side door. Saw Katniss. Then Blaze. "Dog and cat?" I nodded. "Apparently." He looked at me. "You say that a lot?" "More than I used to." The county road began ten minutes later. Two lanes. No centerline for part of it. Forest first. Then farmland. Good road. Not fast.

We crossed a ridge. Dropped into a valley. The weather changed again. Warmer. Brighter. Fields still wet. Low clouds lifting from hills. Blaze saw cows. Tail. "Cows." He remained interested. Katniss saw cows. Nothing. We passed an old barn leaning dramatically but apparently still in use. A tractor. A church. Three houses. A sign with bullet holes. No town yet.

Then: WELCOME TO HOLLOW CREEK Population number had been painted over. I respected the ambiguity. Hollow Creek consisted of: A grocery. Post office. Fire station. Cafe. Hardware store. An old two-story building with boarded upper windows. And, improbably, a movie theater.

The marquee read: FRIDAY CLASSIC FILM SATURDAY COMMUNITY MEETING No film title. Maybe that was the classic part. I parked near the grocery. Blaze needed a break. Katniss needed to pretend she did not. We walked. Leashes. Harness. Slow. The town had sidewalks for about half a block. Then gravel. A creek ran behind the buildings. Probably Hollow Creek. I admired efficient naming.

Near the post office stood a public notice board. Flood warnings. Community dinner. Missing bicycle. Church sale. County road updates. One paper caught my attention. BRIDGE CLOSED TO VEHICLES PEDESTRIAN ACCESS OPEN Below it, handwritten: OLD COVERED BRIDGE Arrow.

I looked at Blaze. He looked at me. Katniss looked at a bush. Democracy continued failing. We walked. The bridge was five minutes away. Wood. Roofed. Weathered. Not enormous. Crossed the creek behind town. Concrete barriers blocked vehicles. Pedestrian path open. I stopped before entering. Read signs. Allowed. Good. Blaze sniffed the boards. Katniss paused. Dark interior. Strange acoustics.

I let her decide. She stepped inside. Our footsteps changed. Wood beneath boots. Blaze claws clicking. Katniss nearly silent. Light entered through gaps. Creek visible below. Water high from storm. Halfway across, Blaze stopped. Sniffed a wall. An old carved name. I looked. Initials. Dates. Some old. Some recent.

“Don’t add anything.” Blaze sniffed. “I mean it.”

At far side, the road continued a short distance then disappeared into brush. Old alignment. Another road that had once mattered. I took out camera. Covered bridge from outside? Too obvious. Again. I walked farther. Turned. Bridge framed by wet trees. Still ordinary.

Then Katniss jumped onto a low stump beside trail. Blaze stood near bridge entrance. Two scales. Two shapes. Bridge behind. I raised camera. Stopped. Too much. I waited. Katniss stepped down. Blaze moved closer. Both walked toward me. Bridge empty behind them. Click. Not planned. Better.

I checked. Blaze slightly left. Katniss tiny near his front leg. Bridge centered in distance. Wet road leading back through it. Keeper. We crossed again. An older woman approached from town. Walking slowly. No dog. No camera. Just walking. She nodded. “Beautiful today.” “Yes.”

“Bridge makes it.” I looked back. “Maybe.” She smiled. “You a photographer?” “Sometimes.” “Everybody photographs the bridge.” “I tried not to.” “Why?” “Everybody photographs the bridge.” She laughed.

Her name was Ruth. Different Ruth. Apparently names also traveled. She had lived in Hollow Creek since childhood. The bridge had been closed to cars years ago after heavier vehicles and maintenance costs became an issue. People complained. Then got used to it. Now they wanted it preserved.

“Funny,” she said. “Nobody cares about something until you tell them they can’t use it anymore.” I wrote that down later. Not in front of her.

She looked at Blaze. “Big dog.” “Yes.” Katniss emerged from behind him. Ruth stopped. “And a cat.” “Apparently.” She smiled. “There it is.” I stared. “What?” “Nothing.” This was becoming a conspiracy. We bought lunch at the grocery. Sandwich. Fruit. Dog-safe treats. Cat food because Katniss had decided one brand was suddenly unacceptable. We ate at a picnic table near the creek.

Blaze watched water. Katniss watched Blaze. I watched both. The small stick came out. I don’t know how. Blaze had hidden it somewhere in the van. Now it lay between his paws.

“You smuggled that.” Tail. “Across county lines.” Tail. “Serious offense.”

Katniss sniffed the stick. Then walked away. Again. After lunch I studied the old map from Daniel’s shop. The road we had taken appeared on it. Not exactly same. Older route bent differently. Bridge was part of it. Then road continued west before eventually connecting south. Modern map showed pieces. Dead ends. Private sections. Changed routes.

The detour we were on was itself layered over older detours. Roads remembering roads. I thought about Mercer again. Old routes. River crossings. Photos that favored landscape over people. I opened the regional photograph book. Found the anonymous road image. Looked at it beside the old map. No connection. Probably none.

Still. I wrote: Mercer: routes? crossings? documentation before change? Then beneath it: Do not make every old photograph Mercer. Important. Katniss stepped onto notebook. “Agreed.” Purr. We continued. South of Hollow Creek, the county road narrowed more. Not bad. Just intimate. Trees close. Creek alongside. Occasional houses. Then we found the storm. Not weather. Aftermath.

A large tree had fallen across road. Not recently enough to be dangerous. Recently enough that nobody had cleared it. Trunk blocked both lanes. I stopped well back. Engine off. Blaze stood. Katniss woke. I looked through windshield. “Detour inside detour.” No room around. Steep

ditch one side. Creek other. No chance. I checked map. Closest alternate route required going back almost fifteen miles. Fine.

Blaze whined. “Road’s closed.” He looked at tree. “No.” I stepped out. Not to move it. To look. Huge. Wet bark. Branches everywhere. Roots exposed up slope. Storm had simply taken it. I took no picture. At first.

Then noticed something. Road disappeared under trunk. Beyond it: Sunlight. Bright stretch of pavement. Empty. Blockage dark foreground. Open road beyond. Obvious metaphor. I hated it. I raised camera anyway. No. Too obvious. Lowered. Blaze stood beside me. Katniss remained in van. Smart. I walked along shoulder. Found a puddle. Reflection. Tree. Road beyond. Sky. Better.

I crouched. Framed mostly reflection. Actual tree only partial. Road visible upside down in water. Click. Checked. Interesting. Keeper maybe. Blaze sniffed puddle. “Don’t.” He drank. Of course. We turned around. This did not bother me. That surprised me. Years earlier, turning around after fifteen miles would have felt inefficient. Now: More road.

Back through Hollow Creek. Ruth still walking. She saw us. “You forget something?” “Road.” She nodded. “Tree?” “Yes.” “Thought they hadn’t gotten that yet.” “Useful information.” She smiled. “Didn’t ask.” Fair. At the grocery I asked clerk about alternate route. She drew one on map. Simple. Twenty-five extra miles.

“Van’ll make it?” She looked outside. “Probably.” I closed my eyes. “That word follows me.”

Alternate route climbed. Slow. Beautiful. We reached top near late afternoon. Pullout. No sign. Just gravel. View across valley. Hollow Creek somewhere below. Old road hidden in trees. Newer highway far beyond. Layers. I took camera. Clouds breaking. No dramatic light. Fine. I photographed valley. One frame. Good. No need more. Blaze sat beside me. Katniss stayed in van doorway. Wind light.

I looked back at Volkswagen. Faded paint. Rust. Open door. Books inside. Dog outside. Cat half in, half out. For the first time, it looked less like Ray’s old van. That bothered me. Then didn’t. Still Ray’s history. Still Ellen’s. Still June’s. Still Roscoe’s. Still Laura and Michael and Evan. And now: Coffee. Wet towels. Dog hair. Cat hair. Maps. My camera bag. A contraband stick.

Layers. Not replacement. Addition. I raised camera. Took one photograph. Van from behind. Door open. Blaze lying nearby. Katniss sitting on step. Valley beyond. Keeper. We reached a campground just before dark. Inland. No ocean sound. Different again. The site sat beneath tall trees. Dry enough. Quiet. Routine. Water. Food. Walk. Harness. Check van.

Katniss did something new. When I opened her harness after we were safely inside, she climbed into the passenger seat. Turned around twice. Slept. No roof. No chair. No protest. Blaze lay down. Stick beside him. Still. I pointed. “You’re keeping it, aren’t you?” Tail. I gave up. Dinner. Book. Notebook. I looked at the day’s photographs. Bridge. Fallen tree reflection. Van overlooking valley.

The bridge photograph was strongest. Not because of bridge. Because Blaze and Katniss were walking toward me together. Neither looking at camera. Neither posing. Same direction. I stared at that longer than expected. Some trails were traveled together. Yes. But increasingly so were parking lots. Bookstores. Wrong turns. Road closures. Lunches. Campgrounds. Fuel stops. Arguments about sticks. The ordinary parts counted too. Maybe more.

I opened Daniel’s old map. Compared it to current one. Roads shifted. Bridges closed. Highways moved. Towns remained. Sometimes. I thought about the morning. The official detour. The unofficial road. The fallen tree. The second detour. A straight route would have been faster. It also would have missed everything.

I wrote: Detours are only mistakes if you’re trying to arrive exactly where you planned. Then stared at it. Too polished. I crossed out exactly. Better. Katniss climbed onto my lap. Blaze snored. Stick rolled beneath his paw.

I looked at crossed-out sentence. Then added: Still annoying when caused by tree. Better. Lights off. In darkness, the van settled. Metal clicked as it cooled. Blaze shifted. Katniss purred. Tomorrow, we’d try south again. The coast was still there. It wasn’t going anywhere. Probably.

I smiled. I had learned not to trust that word. Absolutely. I’ll make one change only: remove the line “No bird supplies. Obviously.” Everything else remains exactly as written.

CHAPTER 28

The Things That Follow You

Morning began with the stick. I had hoped the stick would remain asleep. It did not. Blaze woke, stretched, found it beside his bed, and immediately carried it to the side door. I stared at him. “No.” Tail. “We discussed this.” Tail harder. “The discussion was not favorable.” Blaze held the stick. Katniss watched from the passenger seat. I looked at her. “Back me up.” She began washing one paw. Excellent coalition.

I opened the door. Blaze stepped outside. Still carrying the stick. I followed. The campground was quiet. Cold enough that coffee felt less recreational and more structural. Mist sat low between trees. No ocean visible. No wind. No rain. Just morning.

Blaze placed the stick beside his food bowl. I looked down. “That is not breakfast.” He looked at bowl. Then stick. Then bowl.

“At least you understand categories.”

Katniss exited on her own. That had become normal enough that I almost missed it. She stepped down. Paused. Sniffed. Walked toward the edge of camp. Harness slack. Tail level. No crouching. No statue routine. I watched. Not obviously. Cats disliked witnesses to personal growth. Breakfast. Coffee. Food. Water. Quiet.

While Blaze ate, I took out the map. South still made sense. Eventually. The coast road continued. A larger town appeared thirty or forty miles away. Beyond that, smaller roads. Parks. A river. Several places with names that suggested either logging history or somebody’s surname. Possibly both. I had no reason to choose one. Good.

Katniss stepped onto the map. Again. “You’re getting predictable.” She sat over the larger town. I looked at her. “Vote?” Nothing. “Urban planning?” Nothing. Blaze came over. Sniffed map. Katniss slapped his nose. Not hard. Blaze backed away.

“Motion denied.”

I folded the map. Before leaving, I checked the van. Oil. Tires. Water. Window seal. Still leaking only when rain encouraged it. Nothing urgent.

Then I found a feather. Small. Bright. Caught against the edge of the windshield wiper.

I picked it up. Blue. Maybe green. Hard to tell. Strong color either way. Not unusual. Birds existed. I turned it between my fingers. Blaze sniffed it. Katniss noticed instantly. Her pupils widened.

"No." She reached. I lifted hand. "No." She reached higher. "Absolutely not."

Blaze sat. Again with the performance. I tucked the feather into a small exterior trash pouch until I could dispose of it later. Not a souvenir. Not everything became a souvenir. I had standards. The stick remained. Standards were flexible. We left after eight.

The road returned toward the coast. Sun came through clouds in patches. Wet roads drying. Trees bright where light touched them. Blaze watched. Katniss watched. I drove. Twenty minutes later, Katniss fell asleep. Exactly on schedule. The first stop happened because of a bridge. Not old. Not covered. Not particularly attractive. But below it, the river widened into a broad estuary. Mud flats. Birds. A line of pilings from something gone. Old dock maybe.

There was a public pullout. I stopped. Blaze came out. Katniss did not. She watched birds through the window. Probably safer for everyone. I walked Blaze toward the overlook. Leash short. The estuary was full of movement. Gulls. Small shorebirds. Something larger farther out. Cormorant maybe. Hard to tell. Blaze watched the water. No lunging. Good.

I read the interpretive sign. The river had once supported more commercial traffic. Logs. Fishing. Small freight. The old pilings were remnants from a wharf that had served the community before roads became dominant. There it was again. Water routes replaced by roads. Roads replacing roads. Everything taking turns being essential. I looked at the pilings. Dark wood. Weathered. Birds perched on several.

Camera. I framed the estuary. Too broad. Moved closer. Pilings. Birds. Reflections. One bird lifted. Then another. Three remained. Click. Good. Not spectacular. Keeper maybe. Blaze sniffed grass. I waited. A truck crossed bridge behind us. Loud. Blaze barely reacted. Progress.

Katniss watched from van. She looked less like a passenger now. More like a cat who had somehow acquired a vehicle. We continued. The road entered farmland. Then forest. Then a town. Not the large one from map. Smaller. The map had barely bothered naming it.

I slowed. Main street. Cafe. Feed store. Post office. Auto repair. Small public library. The library mattered. Not because I needed a book. Because I still had Martha's. I parked. Cool day. Safe ventilation. Animals secure. Quick visit.

The library was one room. Maybe two. Old building. New carpet. Children's drawings taped near entrance. A woman behind desk looked up. "Can I help you?" "Possibly." I held up Martha's book. "I borrowed this from a woman who works at another library." She looked at it. "That's not ours." "I know." "Then I can't check it in." "I know." Pause. "Do you want a stamp?" I stared. "What?" She smiled. "You're clearly on some kind of journey."

I laughed. "No." "Good. We don't have a stamp." Her name was Nina. I explained I was trying not to accumulate books. She looked at the book in my hand. "How's that going?" "Poorly." There was a small shelf near the door. COMMUNITY BOOK EXCHANGE Danger.

I placed Martha's book on the counter. Not surrendering it. Just freeing one hand. Nina watched me approach exchange shelf. "You know how those work?" "Unfortunately." I found a photography book. Put it back. A regional history. Put it back. A field guide to coastal birds. Paused. That was practical. Which made it dangerous. I opened it. Gulls. Cormorants. Herons. Kingfishers. Ducks. Raptors. Shorebirds.

Katniss would have considered it a menu. I flipped pages. Stopped at one bird with brilliant plumage. Not rainbow. Still striking. Then another. Then another. I closed book. Put it back. Nina nodded. "Strong." "Thank you." "Rare." "Don't ruin it." I picked up Martha's book.

Before leaving, I saw a bulletin board. Community events. Lost pets. Found pets. Yard sale. Music night. A missing orange cat. A found dog. I stopped. Read. Nothing relevant. Just habit. Nina noticed. "Looking for something?" "No." Then: "Maybe." I thought of the feather on windshield. Not enough to be anything.

Outside, Blaze greeted me as though I had crossed an ocean. Katniss did not move. I showed them Martha's book. "Still ours." Katniss yawned. We drove on. Around noon, we reached the larger town. Population enough for traffic lights. Gas station. Grocery. Chain stores. A veterinarian. Hardware store. Thrift shop. Coffee shop. More people than I wanted. Still useful.

Fuel first. The man at the next pump looked at van. I braced for the question. "Original paint?" "Mostly." He nodded. "Good." National committee remained active. Blaze appeared in window. "Big dog." "Yes." Katniss appeared beside him. The man looked. "And a cat?" I closed my eyes. "Apparently." He laughed. "That's something." "It has become something." Inside gas station, I bought water. Outside, checked tires. Fine.

Then I heard a sound. High. Sharp. Not gull. Not crow. Not anything I immediately recognized. I looked up. Nothing. Again. Two quick notes.

Then silence. Blaze looked up too. Katniss moved to window. I waited. Nothing.

"Bird." Blaze looked at me. "Excellent investigation."

We left. Lunch happened at a small city park. Grass. Large trees. Picnic tables. Walking path. Katniss came out willingly. Blaze came out enthusiastically. Balanced household. We walked before eating. A group of ducks occupied pond. Blaze noticed. I shortened leash. "Leave it." He did. Good. Katniss noticed. I shortened hers too. "No." She stared. The ducks were unconcerned. Probably experienced.

We sat at a table. Blaze beneath. Katniss beside me. I ate sandwich. Blaze watched sandwich. Katniss watched ducks.

"You both need hobbies."

A child nearby pointed. "Mom! That cat is on a leash!" The mother looked over. "So she is." The child came closer. Not too close. "Can I pet her?" "Ask her." Child looked confused. I pointed. "Hold out your hand. Let her decide." Katniss sniffed. Then rubbed once. Permission granted. Child smiled. "What's her name?" "Katniss." "Like the book?" "Yes."

The mother looked at Blaze. "And him?" "Blaze." "Big." "Also yes." The child looked at me. "Are they yours?" There it was again. I looked at Katniss. Then Blaze.

"Blaze is." I paused. "Katniss travels with us."

The child accepted this immediately. Children were good at categories adults insisted on complicating.

"What about you?" I blinked. "What about me?" "Who do you belong to?"

The mother closed her eyes. "Sorry." I laughed. "No, that's fair." I thought. "Mostly myself." The child nodded. Good enough. After lunch, we walked another loop. Near far side of park stood a tree full of birds. Small. Brownish. Nothing unusual. Then a flash. Bright. Gone. I stopped. Katniss stopped. Blaze kept going until leash corrected him. I looked up. Branches. Leaves. Movement.

Nothing.

"Did you see that?" Blaze panted. Katniss stared upward.

Another flash. Different branch. Quick. Color far too bright for the rest of tree. I raised camera. Nothing. Waited. A bird flew across opening. Fast. Too fast. Green? Blue? Red? Impossible. I lowered camera. Not enough. Could have been anything. Sunlight. Toy. Escaped pet. My eyes being unhelpful with color. Katniss remained locked on tree. That part was real.

A sound came again. Sharp. Chattering. Not one I recognized. I took out phone. Recorded ten seconds. Mostly traffic. One bird call near end. Maybe useful. Then silence. I waited another five minutes. Nothing.

“Fine.” Katniss disagreed. I gently encouraged her away.

Back at van, I looked at field guide in my memory. Not helpful. I had not bought it. Excellent discipline. Terrible timing. I could search later. No urgency. Birds existed. Birds escaped. Birds migrated. Birds made sounds. Not everything was a mystery. We continued south. The town faded behind. Road narrowed again. Much better. Clouds built inland. Not storm. Afternoon texture.

I stopped at an overlook because light hit hills. Not ocean. Forest. Patchwork. Old clearings in various stages of regrowth. No dramatic vista. Still good. Blaze out. Katniss stayed. I photographed one ridge. Waited. Cloud shadow moved. A strip of sun traveled across hillside. Click. Good. Then I heard it again. Same sharp chatter. Or similar. I looked toward trees. Nothing.

Blaze looked too. Could be common bird. Probably was. I laughed. “You hear one weird bird and suddenly every bird is weird.” Blaze sneezed. “Exactly.” I moved on. By mid-afternoon, I needed groceries. Small market. Bought: Dog food. Cat food. Fruit. Bread. Coffee. Water. Something resembling vegetables. And, after standing in the pet aisle longer than reasonable, a small packet of dog treats that Blaze did not need.

At checkout, clerk looked out window toward van. “That yours?” “Yes.” “Cool.” “Thanks.” Then: “You traveling?” “Yes.” “South?” “Mostly.” She handed receipt. “Watch weather near coast tomorrow.” “Coming in?” “Wind.” “How bad?” “Probably nothing.” I stared. “That word follows me.” She smiled.

Outside, Katniss sat on dashboard. I opened door. “That is not a cat shelf.” She stayed. Groceries had nowhere obvious to go. I reorganized. Again. Books moved. Camera bag moved. Cat moved. Cat returned. Dog stood in way. Ten minutes later, everything fit. Barely. The Volkswagen was becoming efficient through repeated surrender. I drove another hour. Road passed a small cemetery. Then a church. Then nothing.

A sign pointed toward a county campground near a lake. I turned. The lake was inland. Small. Tree-lined. Quiet. No ocean. No wind. Enough space. Good. Camp routine now required fewer words. Park. Check level. Open. Blaze out. Katniss out. Water. Food. Walk.

Katniss explored farther today. Still tethered. Still supervised. But confident. She sniffed logs. Watched insects. Ignored a squirrel. Mostly. Blaze found another stick. I stared. “No.” He looked at existing stick near van. Then new stick.

“One.” He looked between them.

“One stick.”

He chose new one. Left old. Progress? Maybe. I threw old stick into brush. Blaze immediately retrieved it.

“Fine.” Two sticks. Civilization collapses slowly.

I made dinner. A couple camped two sites over. Quiet. No radio. One small dog. Good. At dusk, birds became active. Calls across lake. Some familiar. Some not. I sat on van step. Camera beside me. Katniss in chair. Blaze between us. A kingfisher rattled somewhere over water. I recognized that. Good. Then another sound. Sharper. Louder. Almost squeaky.

I looked up. Nothing. Again. From trees behind campsite. Katniss immediately stood. I looked at her. “Don’t start.” She jumped from chair. Moved toward edge of tether. Stared. Blaze lifted head. Something moved high in tree. Too dark to see. I took camera. Long lens. Looked. Branches. Leaves. Sky. Movement.

Bird. Small to medium. Wrong silhouette for crow. Too bulky for most songbirds. Longish tail maybe. Then it moved again. A bright patch flashed. Even in fading light. I focused. Too slow. Gone.

“Well.”

Katniss remained interested. I checked camera. Nothing. No photograph. Fine. I sat again. Five minutes later, I heard what sounded almost like a whistle. Then a harsh chatter. Then silence. I looked toward trees. “You’re not helping.” Blaze’s tail hit ground. Thump. Katniss stared. Eventually night won. Birds quieted. Lake darkened. Inside, I opened phone. Signal weak. Still enough.

I searched local bird calls. Listened to several. None matched. Could have been bad recording. Could have been uncommon local bird. Could have been escaped pet. Could have been two different birds I was incorrectly combining. Most likely.

I wrote: Bright bird twice today? Same bird unlikely. Sound unfamiliar. Check later. Then added: Do not invent mystery because bored. Katniss stepped onto notebook. I moved her. She stepped back.

“You’re becoming editorial.” Purr.

I checked the feather from morning. Still in trash pouch. I almost threw it away. Paused. Bright feather. Bright flash at park. Bright flash at overlook? Now campsite. No. Too convenient. I put feather in small envelope instead. Reference. Not souvenir. Important distinction. Blaze looked at me. “Don’t.” I labeled envelope: Unknown feather. Windshield. Date. Location. Then I stared at it. “This is how collections start.” Katniss purred.

I turned off light. Blaze settled. Two sticks beside him now. Katniss took pillow. Outside, lake quiet. Trees dark. Just before sleep, a sound came from somewhere beyond campsite. Quick. High. Then a strange little burst of chatter. Katniss's head lifted instantly. Mine too. Blaze slept through it. I waited. Nothing.

"Bird." Katniss stared into darkness.

"Tomorrow."

She kept staring. I closed my eyes. Some things followed because you carried them. Books. Maps. Photographs. Old keys. Compasses. Sticks, apparently. Other things followed because you kept noticing them. A sound. A color. A question. Sometimes that was enough to turn an ordinary road into something else. Not yet. But maybe soon.

CHAPTER 29

The Bird That Shouldn't Be Here

I woke before Blaze. This had happened before. Rarely. Usually because something was wrong. Nothing was wrong. That made it suspicious. Katniss was awake. Of course. She sat at the front window. Still. Watching trees. I looked at her.

"What?"

Nothing. Her ears moved. Forward. Then slightly left. I listened. Lake. Birds. Somewhere far off, a truck. Blaze snoring. Nothing unusual.

Then: A sharp whistle. Two quick notes. A burst of chatter. Katniss's tail moved once. I sat up.

"Again?"

She stared toward the trees. The sound came from farther away than last night. Or maybe higher. Hard to tell. I reached for the camera. Stopped. Too dark. Also ridiculous. Blaze woke. Looked at me. Then Katniss. Then the window.

"Apparently we're birdwatchers now."

Blaze yawned. The call did not come again. Breakfast. Coffee. Katniss continued watching the trees. Blaze continued believing breakfast was the most important wildlife event of the morning. I respected that. I checked the envelope with the feather. Still there. Small. Bright. Blue-green to me. Maybe something else to everybody with more cooperative eyes. I held it near the window.

Katniss noticed. Immediately.

"No."

Her paw rose. I put it away. I opened my phone. Signal. Barely. Enough. I searched the sounds again. Local birds. Parrots. Escaped birds. Nothing useful immediately. Audio recordings on a phone through campground trees were not exactly forensic evidence. I stopped. This was becoming silly. Bird. Somewhere. Fine. We packed. Blaze carried both sticks to the van.

I stared.

"One."

He looked at me.

"Choose."

He put one down. Picked it back up. Then dropped the other.

"Negotiation successful."

Katniss climbed into the van. No argument. That was becoming normal. I started the engine. The first twenty miles were quiet. No bird calls. No strange flashes. No mystery. Good. I almost relaxed. Then Katniss stood. Passenger seat. Front paws on dash. Focused on something outside.

"Sit."

Nothing. I followed her stare. A bright shape crossed above the road. Fast. Gone behind trees. I slowed. Not dramatically. Enough. Blaze stood. There was nowhere safe to stop. So I didn't.

"That one was real."

Katniss stared behind us. I checked mirror. Nothing. I drove another mile. Found a turnout. Pulled over. Blaze came out. Katniss too. Harness. Leashes. We walked back along a safe gravel shoulder. Not far. Trees. Brush. No bird. I waited. Nothing.

"Excellent."

Katniss remained intensely interested in everything above eye level. Which narrowed the search considerably. A crow flew over. She tracked it.

"Wrong bird."

Then another sound. Whistle. Chatter. Closer. I looked toward a stand of alder and fir. Movement. Bright green. Definitely green. Then blue. Then something warm. Red? Orange? My color vision gave up and filed a complaint. The bird landed. Visible. Maybe forty yards away. I raised camera. Focus. Branches. Leaves. Wrong branch. The bird moved. I found it.

For one second. Short curved beak. Compact body. Longish tail. Color everywhere. Not local. I lowered the camera.

"That is absolutely not from here."

Blaze looked at me. Katniss looked at bird. The bird called again. Loud. Almost metallic. Then flew. Low across opening. Fast. Gone. I had one photograph. Probably terrible. I checked. Blur. Branch. A green streak. Maybe bird. Maybe somebody threw a salad. Not useful. I zoomed anyway. No. Still. Enough for me. I had seen it. Clearly enough.

Parrot. Some kind. I stood there longer. Katniss did too. Blaze found grass. He had moved on. Back at the van, I searched. Parrots Pacific Northwest. Escaped pet birds. Colorful parrots. Lorikeets. Images loaded slowly. Then one stopped me. Rainbow lorikeet. I looked at the screen. Then toward the trees. Then back.

“Well.”

Katniss climbed onto the seat. I enlarged the image. Blue head. Green body. Orange-red chest. Yellow. More colors than necessary.

“That’s close.”

Maybe exact. I wasn’t ready to say exact. One glimpse in bad light did not make an identification. I searched range. Australia. Nearby regions. Not here. Very much not here. I looked at the windshield.

“Interesting.”

Blaze’s tail hit the cabinet. Thunk. I searched escaped lorikeet. Pet. Aviculture. Captive birds. Possible. Much more possible than migration from Australia. That changed things. Not mystery. Responsibility. If it was an escaped companion bird, somebody might be looking. I searched local lost pet listings. Nothing obvious. Social pages. Nothing I could verify quickly. I looked at map.

Next town had a veterinary clinic. Maybe animal control. Possibly a feed store. Fine. We drove. The town was thirty minutes south. Small enough that everything important was within six blocks. Veterinary clinic first. Animals could not come inside casually. I called from parking lot. Explained.

“Found bird?” receptionist asked.

“Not exactly.”

I told her. Bright parrot. Possible lorikeet. Seen along road north of town.

“Can you send the picture?”

“Technically.”

I looked at blur.

“Emotionally, no.”

She laughed.

“Send it.”

I did. A few minutes later, a technician came outside. Her name was Kim. She looked at photo. Zoomed. Turned phone. Zoomed again.

“Could be.”

“Useful.”

“Could also be a blur.”

“Also useful.”

She asked where. I showed map.

“We don’t have any missing-bird report here.”

“Local rescue?”

“There’s an avian rescue farther south. They sometimes track escaped birds.”

She wrote down a number.

“Do lorikeets survive out here?”

“For a while, maybe. Depends on weather, food, condition.”

“Long term?”

She made a face.

“Not something I’d count on.”

That mattered.

“Would it approach people?”

“If it’s tame.”

“Could also not.”

“Yes.”

I looked back toward the van. Katniss watched through glass.

“Cat complicates this.”

Kim followed my look.

“Cat always complicates bird.”

Accurate. Blaze appeared beside Katniss. Kim stared.

“That’s a big dog.”

“Yes.”

Then:

“And a cat.”

I closed my eyes.

“Apparently.”

Kim smiled.

“Everybody says that?”

“Enough people.”

I thanked her. Before leaving town, I stopped at the feed store. Not for bird food. For information. That distinction mattered. The clerk was maybe twenty-five. Baseball cap. Mud on boots. He listened. Bright parrot. North road.

“Oh.”

I waited.

"Yeah, somebody's been talking about that."

I leaned slightly closer.

"Who?"

"Lady came in two days ago asking if anyone had seen a weird colorful bird."

There it was.

"Name?"

He shook his head.

"Didn't get it."

"Did she leave anything?"

He checked counter. Then bulletin board behind register. A card. Handwritten. **LOST BIRD**

Below: **VERY COLORFUL PARROT RESPONDS TO WHISTLING PLEASE DO NOT CHASE** A phone number. No name. No photograph. I stared.

"Can I take a picture of that?"

"Sure."

I did.

"Did she say where it came from?"

"Somewhere north."

"How far?"

"No idea."

"Was it hers?"

He shrugged.

"Think so."

Not enough. Still. Owner or caretaker existed. Searching. I bought dog treats. Because Blaze had somehow participated by existing. Back at van, I called number. Voicemail. Woman's voice. No name in greeting. I left message.

"Hi. My name is Bone. I may have seen your bird north of town this morning. I didn't catch it. I have a rough location and a very bad photograph. Call me back."

Pause.

"Very bad photograph is not an exaggeration."

I hung up. Katniss stared at me.

"Do not get ideas."

She licked paw. We continued south. For the next hour, nothing happened. Good. I stopped at a roadside picnic area. Lunch. Blaze ate. Katniss watched grass. I ate. Phone sat beside me. No call. I looked at

the lost-bird card photo. **PLEASE DO NOT CHASE** Good advice. I searched rainbow lorikeet care. Nectar. Pollen. Fruit. Specialized diet.

Not seed. I stopped. No reason to research further until owner called. Still. Useful to know if bird showed up again. I saved the rescue number. Then the phone rang. Unknown number.

"Hello?"

"Is this Bone?"

"Yes."

Woman. Older voice. Tired. Fast.

"You saw him?"

Him.

"I saw a bird. I think it's the bird you're looking for."

"Where?"

I gave location. Landmarks. Approximate time. Which side of road. Direction of flight. Everything I had. She was quiet.

"That's farther south."

"How far has he been moving?"

"Too far."

Her name was Margaret. The bird's name was Echo. I looked at nothing.

"Echo?"

"Yes."

That name lodged immediately.

"Rainbow lorikeet?"

"Yes."

Confirmed. I looked at Katniss. She looked back.

"How long has he been missing?"

"Four days."

"How'd he get out?"

Pause.

"Storm."

Of course. Margaret explained. Not everything. Enough. Echo had been staying with her. A branch came down during the storm. Damaged part of an outdoor enclosed porch. Door warped. By the time she realized, he was gone.

"Is he yours?"

I asked. Another pause.

“He was my sister’s.”

There was more there. I didn’t push.

“Is he tame?”

“Very.”

“Will he come when called?”

“Sometimes.”

“Useful.”

“He likes whistles.”

“That part made the card.”

She laughed once. Small. Then stopped.

“He also likes people.”

I wrote notes.

“Does he have a leg band?”

“Yes. Silver.”

“Number?”

She gave it. I wrote that too.

“Anything else?”

“He’ll land on shoulders if he trusts you.”

I looked at my shoulder. Then at Katniss.

“That could become complicated.”

“What?”

“Cat.”

“Oh.”

“And dog.”

“Big?”

“Very.”

She sighed.

“Echo grew up around a dog.”

“Cat?”

“No.”

Important. Margaret said she was driving south now. Checking places where people had reported him.

“You don’t have to look,” she said.

“I know.”

That usually meant I was going to.

“If you see him again, don’t grab unless he’s in danger. Just stay calm. Whistle. Call me.”

“Food?”

“Nectar would help, but don’t put anything weird out if you don’t know what you’re doing.”

“Excellent.”

She gave simple emergency advice. Fruit could tempt him briefly. Water. No seed as primary food. No trying to force-feed anything. I wrote.

Then:

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Calling.”

“You’re looking for him.”

“Yeah.”

That was enough. We hung up. I sat. Blaze looked at me. Katniss watched.

“Echo.”

Katniss’s ears moved.

“That’s apparently his name.”

Nothing. I looked at the road north. Could turn back. Not yet. Margaret was already moving through the area. We didn’t know where Echo was now. Chasing randomly would help nobody. So we continued south. Slowly. That lasted twenty minutes. Then I heard a whistle. Not from phone. Not from trees far away. Close. I pulled into the first safe turnout.

Engine off. Silence.

Then: Whistle. Chatter. Above us. Katniss became rigid. Blaze stood. I looked up through windshield. Nothing. Side door. I opened it carefully. Blaze stayed secured. Katniss secured. I stepped outside alone.

“Echo?”

Felt stupid. Nothing. I whistled. Poorly. Silence. Again. Something moved above van. Then a blur dropped from one tree to another. Bright. Very bright. I stayed still.

“Echo?”

The bird turned. Blue head. Green wings. Orange-red chest. Yellow. Actual riot. Even with my color vision, there was no mistaking that this bird had rejected subtlety as a concept. I almost smiled.

“Well.”

Echo looked at me. Head tilted. Then he said something. Not words. Sharp chatter. I whistled. Echo answered. Blaze made one quiet sound inside van. Not bark. Whine. Echo looked toward van. Katniss's face appeared at window. I pointed at her.

"No."

She could not hear tone through glass. Still worth saying. Echo hopped to a lower branch. I did not move. Another lower branch.

"Good."

He watched me. I took phone slowly. Called Margaret. Speaker low. She answered immediately.

"You see him?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

I gave turnout location.

"How close?"

I looked up.

"About fifteen feet."

Her breath changed.

"Don't chase."

"I remember."

"Whistle."

"Already insulted him with it."

A laugh. Real this time. Echo moved again. Lower. Then something unexpected. He flew. Straight at me. I froze. Wings. Color. Air. Then weight. On my hat. I closed my eyes.

Margaret said:

"What happened?"

"He landed."

"On you?"

"Technically on my hat."

"Oh."

Echo shifted. Claws scratching felt. I stood completely still. Inside van, Katniss had become a statue of concentrated criminal intent. Blaze stared upward through open side door.

"Margaret."

"Yes?"

"I have a cat."

"I remember."

"She has noticed."

"Keep them separated."

"Already my life's work."

Echo leaned down. Looked into my face. Close. Bright eyes. Curved beak.

Then: A whistle. Directly above me.

"That was unnecessary."

Margaret heard.

"That's him."

I smiled despite myself.

"Yes."

Echo stayed. For almost a minute. Then flew to the Volkswagen roof. Katniss moved toward side window. I closed it.

"No."

Echo walked across roof. Tapped something with beak. Blaze's tail started. Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.

"This is not a social event."

Margaret said she was about forty minutes away. Forty minutes. Fine. I remained at turnout. No chasing. No grabbing. Echo moved between roof and nearby tree. He seemed tired. Not collapsing. Just less energetic than a healthy wild bird should have been. I put water in a shallow dish outside. Far from Katniss. Far from Blaze. Echo watched.

Didn't approach. I had fruit. Apple. Not ideal. Something. Margaret had said fruit could tempt. I cut a small piece. Placed it near water. Backed away. Echo watched. Five minutes. Nothing. Ten. He came down. Branch. Roof. Ground. I stayed still. He approached fruit. Bit. Then another. Good. Blaze watched from secured interior. Katniss had been moved farther back and clipped safely away from openings.

She was furious.

"Live with disappointment."

Echo drank. Then hopped onto van step. Blaze froze. I stepped between them. Not panicked. Just clear.

"Easy."

Blaze sniffed. Echo leaned forward. I remembered Margaret. Raised around dog. Still. New dog. Large dog. No assumptions. I moved Blaze farther back. Echo climbed onto door edge. Katniss made a tiny sound behind me. I turned.

"Absolutely not."

Echo looked toward sound. No fear. Curiosity. Bad combination. I closed interior separation as best I could. The van had never been designed for wildlife diplomacy. Echo climbed onto my shoulder. There it was. Not hat this time. Shoulder. I looked sideways. Bright face inches away.

"Hello."

Echo clicked his beak.

"You're causing problems."

He whistled.

"Apparently that's your defense."

I did not photograph him. Not yet. Too close. Too strange. Too much to manage. Margaret arrived thirty-seven minutes later. I know because I checked. Small SUV. She pulled in fast. Stopped. Door opened. Woman in her sixties. Gray hair pulled back. Rain jacket. Tired face.

"Echo!"

The bird on my shoulder changed instantly. Body lifted. Head turned. Margaret whistled. Three notes. Echo answered. Then flew. Straight to her. She raised both hands. Echo landed on forearm. Margaret cried. Not dramatically. Quietly. Immediate. I looked away. Some moments were not mine. Blaze watched. Katniss watched. Echo pressed against Margaret's shoulder. She put her face against him.

"Idiot."

Echo whistled.

"Idiot."

I smiled. After a while, Margaret came over. Echo on shoulder.

"This is him."

"I gathered."

She looked at my hat.

"Sorry."

"Hat survived."

She thanked me. Several times. Too many. I told her I had mostly stood still.

"That's why he stayed."

Maybe. She checked his band. Confirmed. Looked him over. Thin. Tired. But alert.

"I need to get him checked."

"Vet?"

"Avian rescue first. They have someone."

Good. She looked into van. Blaze. Katniss. Echo noticed Blaze. Whistled. Blaze's tail moved. Echo leaned toward him. Margaret held him closer.

"Not yet."

Then Echo saw Katniss. Katniss saw Echo. The universe became very still. I pointed at Katniss.

"Don't."

Margaret laughed. Echo tilted his head. Katniss tilted hers. Blaze looked between them. I did not like any part of that geometry. Margaret moved away from van. Good. We talked a little. Not much. Her sister's name had been Diane. Echo had belonged to Diane for years. After Diane died, Margaret took him.

"Recently?"

"Six months."

That explained some things.

"Was that always the plan?"

Margaret looked at Echo.

"No."

I waited.

"Nobody really had a plan."

That also explained things. Echo whistled softly. Margaret scratched his head.

"He loved her."

I nodded.

"So did I."

Nothing to say. She looked at van again.

"You traveling?"

"Yes."

"With those two?"

"Apparently."

She smiled.

"Echo would love that."

I looked at her. She shook her head quickly.

"Not suggesting anything."

"Good."

"He's a nightmare."

Echo whistled.

"I believe you."

She gave me the avian rescue information anyway. In case.

"In case of what?"

Margaret looked at Echo.

"Life."

Fair. Then she loaded him into a travel carrier she had brought. He objected. Loudly.

"That's comforting."

I said.

"He hates carriers."

"Katniss has opinions."

"Apparently everybody does."

There it was. Margaret drove away. I stood beside van. Watched until her SUV disappeared. Then nothing. No bright bird. No whistle. No mystery. Solved. Katniss remained at window.

"He's gone."

She stared down road.

"Back where he belongs."

I said it. Then stood there. Something about sentence felt unfinished. Not wrong. Just unfinished. Blaze nudged my hand.

"Road?"

Tail. We continued south. For the next hour, neither Katniss nor I looked at trees. Much. At camp that evening, everything returned to normal. Or our version. Blaze had one stick. Katniss stole chair. I made dinner. No bird sounds. Good. I checked photographs from day. Estuary. Hillside. One terrible green blur. I stopped on blur. Zoomed. Useless.

Still. First photograph of Echo. Technically. I didn't delete it.

I wrote: **Rainbow lorikeet. Echo. Escaped during storm. Returned to Margaret.**

Then: **Not native. Definitely someone's bird.**

Then: **Problem solved.** I looked at that. Crossed out **Problem solved.** Not because it wasn't. It was. Echo was safe. Margaret had him. That was exactly what should happen. Still.

I wrote instead: **Echo safe.** Better. Katniss stepped onto notebook.

"Do you miss your bird?"

She sat.

"Not your bird."

Purr. Blaze's tail hit cabinet. Thunk. I closed notebook. Outside, night settled. Normal birds called. Normal trees moved. Normal darkness. I listened anyway. No whistle. Good. Probably.

CHAPTER 30

The Space You Leave Open

I woke to a whistle. My eyes opened. Katniss's head lifted. Blaze did not move. Another whistle. Three notes. Clear. Close. I sat up. Katniss was already staring toward the front window.

"No." She looked at me. "Not again."

The whistle came once more. I reached for the side curtain. Pulled it aside. A man was walking through the campground. Hands in pockets. Whistling. Normal person. Normal morning. Normal birdless hat. I stared at him through the glass. He kept walking. Katniss looked at me. "Don't." I lay back down.

The man whistled again. Blaze finally woke. He raised his head. Looked at me.

"False alarm." Tail. "You didn't even participate."

Katniss stayed at the window another minute. Then jumped down. Apparently all three of us had developed expectations. I didn't like that. Breakfast was quieter than usual. Not actually quieter. It only felt that way. There were chickadees in the trees. A woodpecker somewhere beyond camp. A truck started two sites over. A child dropped something metal. Blaze ate. Katniss inspected her breakfast as though quality control had become necessary overnight. Nothing was missing.

Still. I noticed the absence of a sound that had not belonged there in the first place. That seemed unreasonable. I made coffee. Opened my notebook. Yesterday's last entry remained: Echo safe. I looked at it. Closed notebook.

No need to turn one bird into a philosophy. I was becoming vulnerable to that. We packed. Blaze had one stick. This was technically progress. I picked it up. He watched. "Temporary inspection." Tail stopped. The stick was about eighteen inches long. Bark mostly gone. One end chewed. Completely ordinary. I handed it back. Tail resumed.

"You've lowered my standards considerably."

Katniss climbed into the passenger seat. I secured both animals. Checked oil. Water. Tires. Window seal. Everything acceptable. I started the engine. The Volkswagen coughed once. Then settled.

"Don't start." It did not dispute this.

We headed south. The coast returned after twelve miles. Gray water. Bright sky. Wind light. No storm. Blaze watched through the window. Katniss slept. I drove. Nobody mentioned birds. Good. Twenty minutes later, my phone rang. Margaret. I looked at the screen. Then the road. Safe turnout ahead. I pulled in before answering.

"Hello?"

"Hi." Her voice sounded different. Less frightened. More tired.

"Echo?" "Fine."

That came too quickly. I smiled. "Good morning to you too." She laughed. "Sorry. I figured that was your first question." "It was." Margaret had taken Echo to the avian rescue. Then to a veterinarian who worked with birds. Dehydrated. Underweight. Exhausted. No major injuries. No respiratory problems. No obvious damage from the storm or four days outside.

"Lucky," she said. "Very."

Echo had eaten properly. Drunk. Slept. Then begun complaining.

"That's good?" "With Echo, yes."

I looked at Blaze. "Familiar medical standard." Blaze panted. Margaret asked where we were. "South." "Helpful." "Mostly south." "Better." She paused.

"I wanted to thank you again." "You already did." "I know."

I waited.

"And I wanted to tell you something."

There it was.

"Okay."

She didn't speak immediately. I looked toward the ocean. Finally: "I wasn't completely honest yesterday." That sounded worse than it probably was.

"About what?"

"Echo."

I said nothing.

"He was Diane's bird." "I know."

"After Diane died, he came to me."

"I know that too."

"I made it sound like that was settled."

Ah.

“It isn’t?”

“No.”

She exhaled.

“I love him.” “Okay.” “But I’m not sure I’m the right home for him.”

I looked at Katniss. She was asleep. Of course.

“Why?”

Margaret took time answering. Echo had lived with Diane for almost fourteen years. Same house. Same routines. Same windows. Same morning sounds. Same people visiting. Diane worked from home for much of that time. Echo was rarely alone.

Margaret’s life was different. She worked three long days each week at a medical office. She visited grandchildren out of town. Her house was smaller. Her neighbors closer. One had already complained about noise.

“He’s a lorikeet,” she said. “I’ve noticed subtle isn’t really his field.”

She laughed. Then: “He isn’t unhappy.” Important distinction.

“But?”

“I don’t know if he’s happy.”

I understood that less. But enough.

“How would you know?”

“I knew him with Diane.”

That answered it. She continued. Echo had changed after Diane died. Quieter at first. Then louder. More restless. More likely to fly from room to room looking for someone. He had started spending long periods near the porch enclosure. Outside sounds interested him. People interested him. Everything interested him.

“So the storm didn’t make him want out.” “No.”

“It just gave him the opportunity.”

Margaret was quiet.

“That’s what I’ve been wondering.”

I didn’t answer. It wasn’t my conclusion to make. She said the rescue had offered to help rehome him if necessary. Not immediately. No emergency. Nobody was making a decision today. Good.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“I want Diane back.”

Nothing to say. The ocean moved beyond windshield. Blaze shifted behind me. Margaret continued. “But that’s not one of the options.”

"No."

"So I need to figure out what's best for him instead of what's easiest for me."

That sounded familiar.

"That seems fair."

She went quiet again. Then: "He keeps whistling your whistle." I frowned. "My whistle was terrible." "I know."

"That's unfortunate."

"He does it anyway."

I smiled despite myself.

"Maybe he's criticizing it." "Probably."

She laughed again. Better. Then she asked: "Would you mind if I called again?"

"No."

"I don't mean about taking him."

I hadn't said anything.

"Margaret." "Yes?" "You're explaining something I didn't ask."

Silence.

"Right."

I looked at the road.

"Call whenever."

"Thank you."

We hung up. I sat another minute. Katniss opened one eye.

"No."

She closed it. Blaze's tail hit the cabinet. Thunk.

"You too."

We continued south. The next town had a waterfront park. Not ocean. A river meeting the sea. Broad. Slow. Working docks farther away. Public trail along the bank. Dogs permitted on leash. We stopped. Blaze came out first. Katniss followed. No hesitation. That had become so normal I almost missed it again.

The trail ran beside tall grass. Water on one side. Road on other. Nothing spectacular. Good. Blaze sniffed everything. Katniss walked six feet. Stopped. Watched something. Walked another six. Her harness no longer seemed to define the outing. It was just part of it. I noticed. Did not praise. Important.

At a bench near the river, I sat. Blaze lay at my feet. Katniss jumped onto the bench. Then my lap.

“You’re getting predictable.” Purr.

Across the water, a fishing boat moved slowly toward harbor. Small. White wake. Clouds reflected around it. Camera. I raised it. Looked. Lowered. Too ordinary. Waited. A gull crossed. Still ordinary. Then the boat passed behind a line of old pilings. For a moment the hull disappeared in pieces. Water. Wood. Boat. History layered over movement. Click. I checked. Good.

Not great. Keeper maybe. A man walking a small terrier stopped. Looked at Blaze. Then Katniss.

“That’s a cat.”

“Yes.”

“On a leash.”

“Also yes.”

He nodded slowly. “Mine would kill me.” I looked at his terrier. “Which one?” He laughed. His name was Walter. Retired teacher. Lived nearby. Walked the river every morning. We talked for fifteen minutes. Mostly about the town. A little about dogs. Far too much about whether cats should be allowed to vote. Walter believed no. I believed they already did.

Katniss abstained. Walter pointed across river. “Used to be a lumber mill over there.” I looked. Mostly brush now. A few concrete remnants.

“Closed when?” “Before I got here.”

“How long have you been here?” “Forty-three years.”

I looked at him. “So ’before’ is doing a lot of work.” He grinned. He told me the town had changed several times. Logging. Fishing. Tourism. Commuters. Retirees. People complaining that it wasn’t what it used to be.

“What did it used to be?” I asked.

Walter thought.

“Changing.”

Good answer. I wrote that down after he left. We continued walking. At the end of the trail stood a small open area with picnic tables. I let Blaze drink. Katniss found shade. I checked phone. No new messages. Good. I did not know why I checked. Lunch. Bread. Fruit. Something resembling vegetables. Dog food later. Cat food later.

Blaze watched my lunch.

“No.”

He looked at Katniss. She was asleep.

“She’s not helping.”

A bright bird landed in nearby tree. Yellow. Black. Maybe orange on head. Western tanager, perhaps. I stared. Katniss stared. I laughed. “Now you’re all suspicious.” The bird flew. Exactly as local birds were entitled to do. I took no photograph. We left town early afternoon.

The road turned inland again. Forest. Hills. Long stretches with nobody behind us. Good Volkswagen territory. I drove with the window cracked. Cold air. Wet trees. Blaze slept. Katniss watched passing shadows. My phone rang again. Not Margaret. Ray. I answered through speaker. “You’re alive.”

“Last I checked.”

“Van?” “Also alive.”

“Dog?” “Large.”

“Cat?” “Still self-employed.”

Ray laughed.

“Where are you?” “South.”

“Specific.” “Somewhere between water and trees.”

“That narrows the Northwest.”

He asked about the van. Oil. Temperature. Fuel. Brakes. Window leak. I told him about the seal.

“Still leaking?” “Only when it rains.”

Ray paused. “That’s when seals usually matter.”

“Technical insight.”

“Free.”

He asked if I had named the Volkswagen.

“No.”

“Good.”

I frowned. “You keep saying that.”

“Means you’re not forcing it.”

I looked at the dashboard. Faded. Scratched. Nothing announcing itself.

“No name.”

“Then don’t.”

Fine. I told him about the coast. The old roads. The covered bridge. The storm. Not every detail. Enough. I did not mention Echo at first. Ray noticed.

“You sound like you’re leaving something out.”

“Bird.”

Pause.

"Bird?"

I explained. Bright. Wrong continent. Storm. Lost. Margaret. Found. Returned. Ray listened. When I finished: "You keeping it?"

"No."

"Good."

I waited.

"Why good?"

"Because it's somebody's bird."

"Exactly."

Another pause.

"Unless it isn't."

I stared at speaker. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing."

"Ray."

"People say that when it means something."

"Learned from you."

I smiled.

"He's with the woman who was caring for him." "Then that's where he is."

Simple. I liked simple. Ray asked about Blaze. I told him about the sticks.

"Plural?"

"Temporarily."

"You let him bring two sticks into Ellen's van?"

I looked at dashboard.

"My van."

Silence. Then Ray said: "Yeah." Just that. I wished I could see his face.

"Still Ellen's too." I said.

"Yeah."

Both could be true. Ray cleared his throat.

"Laura says you owe pictures."

"I know."

"Michael says no food truck."

"Still not a food truck."

"Evan says send the dog."

"No."

Ray laughed.

“Come back sometime.”

“I said I would.”

“I know.”

We hung up. I drove another ten miles before realizing I was smiling. The road climbed. At the top, a small turnout overlooked forest all the way toward a distant line of water. I stopped. Blaze out. Katniss stayed on the step. Clouds moved fast overhead. Light shifting across trees. I took one photograph. Then another. Neither good.

Waited. A patch of light moved toward a single ridge. Stopped there. Everything around it dark. Click. Good. Then the light moved on. I looked at camera. Keeper. No dog. No cat. No van. Just ridge. I liked that. Not every photograph needed proof of company. We continued.

Late afternoon, I found a small campground beside a river. Not much advertised. Ten sites. Six empty. No hookups. No problem. We took one near the end. Routine. Park. Level enough. Door. Animals. Water. Food. Walk. Blaze discovered a third stick.

“No.”

He looked at me.

“You already have one.”

He dropped the new stick. I froze.

“Did you just listen?”

Blaze picked it up again. Of course. I traded him the old stick. He considered. Then chose the new one. One stick. Victory. Katniss walked along river edge with me. Far enough back from water. Harness loose. She stopped beside a fallen log. Climbed onto it. Sat. Blaze stood below. I looked at them. Camera stayed down. Already had that photograph in a dozen forms. I wanted the moment instead.

We stayed until Katniss moved. Back at camp, I made dinner. A message came from Margaret. Not a call. A photo. Echo. Sitting on top of what looked like a kitchen cabinet. Head tilted. One foot holding something he probably wasn’t supposed to have. Below it: He stole my reading glasses. Apparently recovery is going well. I laughed.

Blaze looked up. Katniss opened one eye. I showed them phone. “Your criminal associate.” Katniss stared at image. Her ears moved forward. Blaze sniffed screen.

“That’s not useful.”

Another message arrived. The rescue wants me to bring him back in two days for a follow-up. I’m going to talk with them about long-term options. No decisions yet. I read it twice. Then typed: Good. No rush.

Stopped. Deleted. Typed: Glad he's feeling better. Take your time. Sent. That was better. I put phone down.

Katniss immediately stepped on it.

"Communication complete." Purr.

Evening cooled. I sat on the van step. Blaze beside me. Katniss eventually took the chair. Of course. River moved beyond trees. Steady. No ocean. No whistles. I opened Martha's book. Finished the last four pages. Closed it. There. Done.

I looked at cover. A book that had traveled farther than necessary because I didn't want to let it go. Tomorrow I would find somewhere to leave it. Maybe. I put it beside the door. Then reconsidered. Moved it back to shelf.

"Tomorrow."

Katniss watched.

"Don't judge."

She did. Darkness came slowly. I checked photographs. Boat through pilings. Ridge in light. The ridge was the keeper. Simple. Empty. I wondered whether I was photographing differently now. Maybe. Earlier, emptiness had been the subject. Then Blaze started appearing. Then Katniss. Now sometimes the empty frames felt different because I knew they were standing just outside them.

Company changed solitude without eliminating it. That mattered. I opened notebook. Wrote: Walter: "What did the town used to be?" "Changing." Then: Echo healthy. Follow-up in two days. I stopped. Was that necessary? Maybe. I left it. Then: Ray says van is mine. I stared at that sentence. Crossed out says. Wrote: Van is mine. That felt strange.

I didn't cross it out. Blaze's stick rolled across floor. Stopped against my boot. Katniss jumped inside. Walked over notebook. Sat beside me. I looked around. Faded cabinets. Old upholstery. Books. Camera. Maps. Dog food. Cat food. Ellen's compass. Old keychain. One stick. There was more space than when I started. And less. That seemed impossible. But space wasn't only measured in inches.

Some space was what you made room for. A dog. A cat. Old photographs. Promises to return. A bird that had already gone home. I closed notebook. No conclusions. Too early. Outside, a bird called. Normal. Local. Unremarkable. Katniss's head lifted anyway. I looked at her.

"No."

She looked toward the sound. Blaze's tail moved once. Thunk. I smiled. The space was still there. Whatever belonged in it could decide for itself.

CHAPTER 31

What Comes Back

The next morning began with a missing book. Not lost. Missing. Different category. I knew where Martha's book had been. Shelf beside the door. Top left. Between the coastal history book and the thin collection of old photographs. It was not there. I checked floor. Bench. Camera bag. Under blanket. Passenger seat. Back shelf. Nothing. Katniss watched from the dashboard.

Blaze had a stick. One stick. Progress remained technically alive. I looked at Katniss.

"Book."

Nothing. I looked at Blaze.

"Book."

Tail.

"Neither of you is helpful."

I searched again. Then found it beneath Katniss. She had been sitting on it. I stared. She stared back.

"That was evidence."

Purr. I pulled the book free. She allowed this with the expression of someone granting a temporary permit. I had finished it. Which meant I had to decide what happened next. Keep it. Trade it. Return it somehow. Pass it along. Books were easier before they acquired people. Martha had not technically asked for it back. She had simply threatened the length of my borrowing period with professional intensity.

I turned it over. Looked at the cover.

"Today."

Katniss jumped down. I chose to interpret that as approval. Breakfast. Coffee. Water. One stick. One book. Normal morning. The river beside camp moved slower than yesterday evening. Or looked slower. Morning did that to water. I checked messages. Nothing from Margaret. Good. That should not have been disappointing. It wasn't. Probably. I packed.

The plan was simple: Find a town. Find a book exchange. Leave Martha's book somewhere useful. Continue south. The plan failed within forty minutes. Not dramatically. Just enough. The first town had no bookstore. No library open. No public exchange.

The cafe had a shelf labeled: **TAKE A BOOK LEAVE A BOOK** Perfect. I parked. Cool weather. Safe ventilation. Animals secure. Short visit. Inside smelled like coffee and frying potatoes. Good. I ordered coffee I did not need. Then stood in front of the book shelf. Martha's book in hand. There were maybe twenty books. Mysteries. Romance. Two cookbooks.

One biography. A guide to mushrooms. Something about rebuilding carburetors. I almost kept the book. Then a woman behind the counter said:

"Looking for something?"

"No."

She waited.

"Trying to leave something."

"Harder?"

"Apparently."

She nodded.

"Usually is."

I put Martha's book on the shelf. Immediately picked it back up. The woman said nothing. That made it worse. I looked at the title. Martha would approve of circulation. Probably. I set it down again. This time I stepped away.

"Coffee?"

the woman asked.

"I already have one."

"Need another?"

"No."

She poured one anyway.

"On the house."

"Why?"

"You look like you just abandoned a relative."

I looked at shelf.

"Book."

"Same thing for some people."

Fair. Her name was Denise. I stayed long enough to drink half the coffee. We talked about the road. Nothing important. Construction south. A good rest area near the river. One coastal section still windy.

Then she asked:

"You camping?"

"Mostly."

"In that van?"

I looked through window. Old faded Volkswagen. No name. No paint. No identity beyond history and use.

"Yes."

"Does it have a name?"

I looked at her.

"No."

She smiled.

"Give it time."

I frowned.

"Everybody says that now."

"Maybe everybody's right."

I looked at the van again.

"No."

"Okay."

I left before the conversation became organized. Outside, Blaze greeted me. Katniss did not. I opened door. Looked back at cafe window. Martha's book still on shelf. Good. I closed door. Then opened it again. Walked back inside. Denise looked up.

"I knew it."

"Not helping."

I went to shelf. Book was gone. I froze. A man at a corner table held it. Reading. That solved it. I turned around. Denise smiled.

"Better?"

"Yes."

"Good."

I left. Back at the van, I sat for a minute. Katniss stepped onto my lap.

"I didn't take it back."

Purr.

"Growth."

Blaze's stick hit the floor. Thunk.

“Different growth.”

We continued south. The road ran inland for a while. Forest. Hills. A river appearing occasionally through trees. No coast. No birds that shouldn’t be there. Normal. I liked normal. Then my phone rang. Margaret. I pulled into a safe turnout before answering.

“Morning.”

“Hi.”

“Echo?”

She laughed.

“You don’t even pretend anymore.”

“No.”

“He’s fine.”

Good.

“Follow-up today?”

“In about an hour.”

I looked at clock.

“That’s sooner than I thought.”

“Same.”

She paused.

“I wanted to ask you something.”

There it was again.

“Okay.”

“Where are you?”

“South.”

She sighed.

“Specific.”

I gave nearest town.

“Oh.”

“What?”

“You’re not that far.”

That changed the air.

“How far?”

“Maybe forty-five minutes from the rescue.”

I looked at road.

“Why?”

Another pause.

"I don't know."

Good answer. Not useful. She continued.

"The rescue wants to talk about placement options after his exam."

"Okay."

"I said I wasn't ready."

"Okay."

"They said that's fine."

"Good."

"Then I thought maybe..."

She stopped. I waited.

"Maybe it would help if you were there."

I looked at Blaze. Then Katniss.

"Why?"

"Because you met him away from me."

I said nothing.

"You saw what he was like outside his normal environment."

"Mostly hungry and annoying."

"That's still information."

I smiled.

"And he trusted you."

There it was. I looked out windshield.

"I don't know anything about lorikeets."

"The rescue does."

"I don't know your family."

"You don't need to."

"I don't know what you should do."

"I know."

That mattered. She was not asking me to decide. Just stand there. I had done that before.

"I can come."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

"Don't make it significant."

"Too late."

I hung up. Katniss stared at me.

"No."

She blinked.

"We are not adopting a bird."

Blaze's tail moved once. Thunk.

"You too."

I started engine. The rescue sat outside a town larger than the ones we'd been passing. Not city-large. Enough traffic to make the Volkswagen feel older. I parked away from main entrance. Shade. Cool weather. Animals could not go inside. Obviously. I set them up safely. Water. Ventilation. Secure. Katniss looked through glass. Blaze watched me.

"Short."

They had heard that before. I went inside. The rescue occupied part of an old veterinary building. Not glamorous. Clean. Functional. Signs everywhere. Parrot care. Diet. Enrichment. Noise. Lifespan. Commitment.

One sign said: **A PARROT IS NOT A DECORATION.** Good start.

Another: **SOME SPECIES MAY OUTLIVE YOUR PLANS.** Better. Margaret sat in waiting area. Echo's carrier beside her. He heard me before I saw him. Whistle. My whistle. Bad version. I stopped. Margaret looked up.

"See?"

"Unfortunate."

Echo whistled again.

"He's mocking me."

"Probably."

I sat. Echo pressed near carrier door. Bright. Rested. More alert than two days ago.

"Looks better."

"He is."

He clicked his beak. I leaned closer.

"Hello."

Whistle.

"Still rude."

Margaret smiled. A woman came through door. Forties. Short hair. Scrubs.

Name badge: **Dr. Alvarez** She introduced herself. Avian veterinarian. Worked with rescue several days each month.

"You're Bone?"

"Apparently."

Margaret laughed. Dr. Alvarez looked at Echo.

"So this is the mysterious roadside contact."

"I mostly stood there."

"That's often the correct thing."

Good. They took Echo to exam room. Margaret asked if I wanted to come. I hesitated.

"Is that okay?"

Dr. Alvarez nodded.

"As long as you're calm and don't interfere."

"Core skill."

We went. Echo came out of carrier reluctantly. Not screaming. Complaining. A constant stream of offended sounds. Dr. Alvarez weighed him. Checked eyes. Nostrils. Feet. Wing condition. Keel. Hydration. Band. I stayed back. Echo watched me. Then Margaret. Then vet.

"Weight's better," Dr. Alvarez said.

Margaret exhaled.

"He still has some recovering to do, but I'm not seeing anything alarming."

Good. She asked about behavior. Margaret explained. Diane. Six months. Restlessness. Noise. Escape. Porch. Dr. Alvarez listened.

Then:

"Escaping doesn't necessarily mean he was unhappy."

Margaret nodded.

"Birds investigate opportunities."

"I know."

"But the change in behavior after Diane died matters."

Margaret looked at Echo.

"He lost his person."

"Yes."

Silence. Dr. Alvarez continued.

"That doesn't mean he can't bond with someone else."

Echo moved along perch.

"It also doesn't mean the next home should be chosen quickly."

I liked her. She talked about lorikeets. Social. Intelligent. Messy. Loud. Specialized diet. Daily interaction. Enrichment. Flight. Routine. Long-term commitment. Margaret listened carefully. I listened because I was standing there. That was all.

Then Dr. Alvarez asked:

“What does Echo do when you leave the room?”

Margaret thought.

“Calls.”

“For how long?”

“Depends.”

“Five minutes?”

“Sometimes longer.”

“An hour?”

Margaret looked down.

“Sometimes.”

That mattered.

“Does he settle?”

“Eventually.”

“Does he forage?”

“Sometimes.”

“Play independently?”

“Less than he used to.”

Dr. Alvarez nodded.

“Not unusual after losing a bonded person.”

Margaret’s eyes changed. Not crying. Close. Echo climbed onto her forearm. She scratched his head.

Dr. Alvarez asked:

“What happens on your workdays?”

“Neighbor checks once.”

“How long alone total?”

“Nine hours.”

“That’s a long day for this bird.”

Margaret nodded. No defensiveness. Good.

Then she asked:

“What are my options?”

There it was. Dr. Alvarez listed them. Keep Echo, but restructure routine. More enrichment. More interaction before and after work. Potential sitter or bird-experienced visitor on long days. Safe flight and foraging opportunities. Possibly daycare or boarding support sometimes. Or rehome carefully. Not surrender and forget. Not first person with a cage. Screened placement. Experienced home. Correct diet.

Proper setup. Time.

“No rush,” Dr. Alvarez said.

“He’s safe.”

Margaret looked relieved and disappointed at same time.

“That’s what everybody keeps saying.”

“Because it’s true.”

Then Dr. Alvarez looked at me. I did not like that.

“You travel?”

“Yes.”

“With animals?”

“Dog and cat.”

Margaret looked at me. I looked at her.

“No.”

Dr. Alvarez laughed.

“I didn’t ask.”

“Good.”

She smiled.

“Margaret said Echo approached you.”

“Yes.”

“Shoulder?”

“Hat first.”

“Of course.”

Echo whistled. I pointed.

“See?”

Dr. Alvarez watched him.

“He is social.”

“Yes.”

“Travel isn’t automatically bad for parrots.”

I felt trap forming.

“But.”

Good.

“It would require careful acclimation, secure travel housing, climate control, diet storage, veterinary planning, safe flight management, predator separation, and a lot more structure than traveling with a dog.”

I looked at Katniss mentally.

“And a cat.”

“Especially a cat.”

Excellent.

Margaret said:

“He’s not asking.”

“I know.”

I looked at both.

“Correct.”

Echo leaned toward me. I stepped back.

“Don’t.”

He whistled. Dr. Alvarez smiled.

“Nobody’s making decisions today.”

Best sentence in room. After exam, Echo returned to carrier. He objected. Loudly. Healthy complaint. Margaret and I walked outside. Blaze saw us through window. Tail. Katniss saw Echo’s carrier. Her entire body changed.

“No.”

Margaret laughed. Echo called. Katniss stared. Blaze stood. I looked at van. Then carrier. Then animals.

“This is a terrible meeting.”

Margaret said:

“Could he sit outside for a minute?”

I looked at weather. Cool. Safe.

“Yes.”

We moved away from van. Far enough. Margaret opened carrier after clipping Echo securely to a travel perch setup she had brought. Not loose. Good. Echo stepped out. Blaze watched. Katniss watched harder. I opened side door enough for Blaze to see while remaining restrained. Katniss stayed farther inside. Secure. Echo saw Blaze. Whistle. Blaze’s tail moved. Echo leaned forward.

Blaze sniffed air. No barking. Good.

Margaret said:

“He lived with Diane’s old dog.”

“What kind?”

“Terrier mix.”

I looked at Blaze.

“Scale change.”

Echo seemed unconcerned. Blaze sat. Excellent. Katniss made one tiny chirping sound. Every head turned toward her.

"No."

She froze. Echo tilted his head. Katniss tilted hers. Again. That geometry. I closed door slightly.

"Enough."

Margaret did not argue. Good. Echo climbed onto her shoulder. Then arm. Then perch. Restless. Interested. He looked at van. Then me. Then van. I refused meaning. Birds looked at things. That was all. Margaret watched him.

"He's different out here."

"How?"

"More awake."

I looked. Maybe. Could have been novelty. Could have been air. Could have been us. Could have been nothing.

"Don't build a conclusion from ten minutes."

She looked at me.

"That's annoyingly sensible."

"Rare."

We stayed maybe fifteen. Then Echo went back into carrier. Complaint resumed.

Margaret asked:

"Where are you headed?"

"South."

She smiled.

"Still."

"Mostly."

"Any timeline?"

"No."

"Any place you have to be?"

I thought of Ray. Not appointment. Promise.

"No."

She nodded.

Then:

"I might call you after I think."

"Okay."

"No pressure."

“Good.”

“I mean it.”

“Margaret.”

“Right.”

She laughed. We said goodbye. Echo whistled from carrier. I whistled back. Poorly. He answered. I regretted establishing this. Then they left. Katniss remained at window until car disappeared. I looked at her.

“Not yours.”

She blinked. Blaze nudged door.

“Also not yours.”

Tail. We drove. For maybe thirty miles, nothing happened. Good. I wanted nothing. Road followed river. Then climbed into forest. I stopped at a rest area because Blaze needed water and I needed to walk. Katniss came out too. Normal. Very normal. We walked a short loop. No exotic birds. Excellent. A Steller’s jay landed on railing. Blue.

Black. Local. Correct. I looked at it.

“Thank you.”

The jay screamed.

“Still bird.”

Katniss watched. I shortened leash.

“No.”

Balance restored. At lunch, I reorganized one cabinet. No reason. Camera batteries together. Food higher. Books shifted. Towels easier to reach. Then I noticed a gap. Small. About eight inches wide. Nothing special. A space where Martha’s book had been. I stared. Ridiculous. I moved coastal history book over. Filled gap. Better. Then moved it back. Gap returned.

I looked at Katniss. She watched me.

“Don’t.”

I left gap. Not for anything. Just because shelves did not need to be full. We continued. Afternoon became bright. Clearer than recent days. I stopped at a roadside farm stand. Apples. Pears. Jam. Honey. Bought fruit. Not because of Echo. Because I needed fruit. I looked at apples. Definitely not because of Echo. Blaze got no treat.

He had received enough random treats to destabilize policy. Katniss got nothing. She did not care. We camped that evening near a state forest trail system. Pet-friendly campground. Some trails allowed leashed dogs. Good. I chose one short path before dinner. Blaze came. Katniss came. Forest floor damp. Light low. Fern. Moss. Logs. The three of us moved slowly.

Katniss had become surprisingly good on short trails. Not dog-good. Cat-good. Important difference. She stopped often. Changed mind. Backtracked. Investigated. Blaze learned to wait. Mostly. At one point Katniss sat in middle of trail. No reason. Blaze waited. I waited. Five minutes. Nothing.

"Meeting?"

Katniss looked at tree. Blaze sat. I sat on log. There. No destination. No purpose. Just paused. Eventually Katniss stood. Continued. I smiled. Some trails were traveled at cat speed. Back at camp, I made dinner. No messages. Good. Then one. Margaret. **Thank you for coming today.**

I typed: **Of course.** Stopped. Deleted.

Typed: **Glad I could help.** Sent. Another message came. **I keep thinking about what you said. Ten minutes isn't a conclusion.** Good.

Then: **I'm going to give this time.** Better.

I replied: **That sounds right.** Then she sent a picture. Echo on a perch near window. Watching outside. No joke. No glasses. No caption. I looked longer than necessary. Then put phone down. Blaze slept. Katniss sat in chair. Normal. I opened notebook.

Wrote: **Echo follow-up good. Weight improving. No decision.**

Then: **Margaret giving it time.** I stopped.

Then: **Martha's book finally moved on.** That one mattered. I looked at shelf. Gap still there. I could fill it tomorrow. Bookstore. Map. Food. Anything. I did not. Outside, something fluttered through branches. Katniss's head lifted. I looked. Moth. Large.

"No."

She watched anyway. Blaze's tail moved once. Thunk. I looked at empty shelf space. Then van. Then darkening forest. Some things came back because you called them. Some because they remembered. Some because they had nowhere else to go. Some did not come back at all. That could be right too. I thought about Martha's book in somebody else's hands.

Ray's van becoming mine. Echo back with Margaret. Diane gone. Katniss choosing road. Blaze choosing me before I understood it. Nothing stayed where it started. Maybe that was not loss. Maybe sometimes movement was the proof that something had been alive. I closed notebook. Katniss jumped inside. Walked past empty shelf. Ignored it. Blaze followed. Stick first. I looked at him.

"Still one."

Tail. Good. Lights off. Forest quiet. No whistles. No bright flashes. No decisions waiting for morning. Just room. For now.

CHAPTER 32

Nothing Missing

Morning came slowly. Not because the sun was late. Because nobody was in a hurry. That had become useful. Blaze woke first. This was more normal. He stretched. Found the new stick. Carried it three feet. Dropped it. Looked at me.

“Still one.” Tail.

Katniss remained curled on the passenger seat. One eye open. Technically awake. Emotionally unavailable. I made coffee. The forest around camp was cool and damp. Birds everywhere. Normal birds. Local birds. Birds that did not require phone calls. I appreciated them.

A Steller’s jay landed near the picnic table. Blue. Black. Loud. Katniss’s head lifted.

“No.”

The jay screamed.

“Also no.”

Blaze looked between us. Not involved. Good choice. Breakfast. Water. Coffee. Nothing unusual. I checked my phone. No messages. Good. I put it away. The empty space on the shelf remained. Martha’s book gone. Nothing replacing it. I looked at the gap. Then at the rest of the shelf. Books. Maps. Camera batteries. A folded cloth. Nothing missing. That was different from empty.

I liked that. We packed. The state forest had several short trails open to dogs on leash. One began less than a mile from camp. I could have driven south immediately. Instead, we walked. Blaze approved. Katniss did not vote.

The trail followed an old logging road. Wide at first. Grass growing through center. Moss on edges. Trees reclaiming everything slowly. Blaze walked ahead within leash range. Katniss behind me. Then beside me. Then stopped. I stopped. Blaze stopped. We waited. Katniss stared into ferns. Nothing happened.

“Important?”

She took three steps. Stopped again. Blaze sat. I looked at him. “You’re learning.” Tail. Katniss continued. Cat speed. The old road narrowed. At one bend, a rusted cable disappeared into brush. Logging relic. Maybe. Could have been newer. I did not invent history. Progress.

Farther in, we found an old concrete footing beside creek. No sign. No plaque. No explanation. I took a photograph. Reference only. Maybe research later. Blaze sniffed it. Katniss jumped onto it. I raised camera. Too easy. Lowered. Katniss looked offended.

“Not everything.”

She sat anyway. The creek crossed beneath the road through an old culvert. Water clear. Cold-looking. Blaze leaned toward it. “No.” He looked at me.

“Drink from bowl.”

He looked at creek again.

“Society.”

He sighed. Or breathed. Close enough. We reached a small clearing where the old road ended. Not officially. Trees simply won. Saplings grew through gravel. Blackberries crowded edges. A fallen trunk lay across what had once been road. I stood there. Maps made roads look permanent. They weren’t. I took camera out.

No dramatic light. No storm. No mountain. No animal in frame. Just road becoming forest. Click. I checked. Good. Quiet. Keeper. We turned around. Katniss walked better on return. Less stopping. Blaze carried a stick he found halfway back. I stared at it. He looked at me.

“No.”

He kept walking. I looked at old stick back at camp.

“One stick.”

He stopped. Dropped new stick. I froze.

“That worked?”

He picked it up again. Of course. At camp, he compared both. Old stick. New stick. Old. New. Katniss sat nearby. Watching. Blaze chose the old one. I looked at him.

“Sentimental.” Tail.

I threw new one into brush. He ignored it. Actual progress. We left camp around ten. South. Mostly. The road stayed inland. Dense forest. Small towns. Occasional farm. No coast visible. I liked that too. Travel felt different when water disappeared. Contained. Green. Narrow. Katniss stayed awake longer. She watched mailboxes. Driveways. People. Blaze slept.

At one point we passed a school bus. Children looked out windows. Several pointed at van. One pointed at Blaze. Another clearly noticed Katniss. I waved. Three children waved back. One did not. Suspicious child. We stopped for fuel in a town with one main street and too many antique shops. I filled tank. Checked oil. Checked tires. Checked under van. Nothing leaking.

Good. A woman at next pump looked at Volkswagen. Here it came.

"Original paint?"

"Mostly."

She nodded. "Keep it." National committee. Still active. Blaze appeared in window.

"That's a big dog."

"Yes."

Katniss appeared beside him. The woman looked. "And a cat." I waited. She smiled. "Apparently?" I stared. She laughed. "Sorry. My husband heard you say that at a gas station two towns north last week." I closed my eyes.

"This is spreading."

"Apparently."

I looked at her. She laughed harder. Fine. Inside station, I bought coffee. Again. Not needed. Tradition. There was a bulletin board near restroom. Lost pets. Jobs. Firewood. Trailer for sale. Community theater. I looked automatically. No bird. Good. Then I realized I had looked for bird. Less good. I went outside. Katniss had moved to passenger seat.

"Nothing."

She looked away. We continued. At noon, we reached a town built along a wide river. Not large. Enough for a grocery, laundromat, diner, hardware store, and a small park. Laundry. That was necessary. Adventure eventually became laundry.

I found a laundromat with parking where I could keep van in sight. Cool day. Safe ventilation. Animals secure. Inside, three machines worked. One sounded like it was processing gravel. I avoided that one. Clothes in washer. Coffee on folding table. Book open. I had brought the coastal history book. Read two pages. Phone buzzed. Margaret. Message. I looked.

Echo destroyed a wooden toy this morning and then screamed because it was gone. I smiled. Another message: I think he's feeling better. I typed: Sounds medically promising. Sent. Then stopped. No question. No decision. Just update. Good. I put phone down. Washer turned. Outside, Blaze's face appeared in side window. Katniss slept. I read. A man folding towels looked at my book. "Local history?"

"Regional."

"You from around here?"

"No."

"Passing through?"

"Mostly."

He nodded.

"My wife says passing through is how half the people here ended up staying."

I looked up.

"That's dangerous."

"Very."

His name was Carl. He had moved there twenty-eight years ago for six months. Of course.

"What kept you?"

He folded towel.

"First a job." Another towel. "Then her." Another. "Then I realized I knew which grocery clerk hated Mondays."

I smiled.

"That's the threshold?"

"Pretty much."

He pointed toward window. "That's your van?"

"Yes."

"Traveling in it?"

"Yes."

"Named?"

I stared at him.

"No."

Carl shrugged. "Good." I narrowed eyes.

"Why?"

"Names stick."

I waited. He folded another towel.

"If you're not sure what something is yet, don't tell it."

That was better than I expected from laundromat philosophy. I wrote it down later. Not immediately. That would have been rude. Dryer. Fold. Pack. Blaze greeted me. Katniss remained asleep. I placed clean clothes in cabinet. The empty shelf gap remained. Could fit something there.

Didn't. Lunch at river park. Blaze ate. Katniss explored grass. I ate something that claimed to contain vegetables.

A small flock of geese moved across river. Blaze watched. No pulling.

"Good."

Katniss watched harder.

"No."

Balance. The park had a paved trail following riverbank. We walked. Old cottonwoods. Benches. Fishing access. A small memorial plaque for a ferry crossing that had operated before bridge construction. I read it. The ferry had connected communities across river before permanent bridge. Simple. Useful. I looked upstream. Modern bridge visible. Cars crossing. Another crossing replaced. Another route changed.

I raised camera. Old ferry landing remains in foreground. Bridge distant. Water between. Too obvious. I moved. Found angle with no plaque. Just worn concrete at water edge and bridge far beyond. Click. Better. Keeper maybe. Blaze sniffed one corner. Katniss sat near my boot. A fish jumped. Katniss startled. Blaze startled because Katniss startled. I laughed. Both looked at me.

"Nobody saw."

A fisherman thirty feet away raised hand.

"I did."

I looked at him.

"You don't count."

He smiled. We left after an hour. Road crossed river. Then followed hills. Afternoon warmed. I cracked windows. The Volkswagen ran well. No strange sounds beyond known strange sounds. Cabinet rattle. Door whistle. Rear click. Everything familiar. I realized that. Familiar. Not reliable exactly. But known. There was comfort in knowing which noises were normal. The phone rang around three. Margaret.

I found safe pullout. Stopped.

"Everything okay?"

"Yes."

Good. She sounded nervous anyway. I waited.

"I talked to the rescue again."

"Okay."

"And my family."

"Okay."

"And my neighbor."

"Brave."

She laughed once.

"My neighbor still hates Echo."

"Reasonable."

"Not helping."

"Sorry."

She paused.

"I think I know what I want to do."

There it was. I leaned back.

"What?"

"I want to find him another home."

Quiet. I looked out windshield. Trees. Road. Nothing moving.

"Okay."

"I feel horrible."

"Why?"

"Because Diane loved him."

"That doesn't answer why you should keep him."

Silence. Then: "I know." She sounded close to crying. I let quiet sit. She continued.

"I keep thinking if I give him away, I'm giving away part of her."

There it was. I looked at Ellen's compass hanging nearby.

"No."

Margaret stopped.

"No?"

"You don't give away a person by changing what happens to their things."

I touched compass.

"Sometimes keeping something exactly where it was is not the same as taking care of it."

Quiet. I thought of Ray. Curtains folded into photo box. Van moving again. Margaret said: "You sound like you've done this."

"Different object."

"What?"

"Volkswagen."

She laughed through whatever emotion had been there.

"That's not helpful."

"It rarely is."

Then she asked: "Would you think I was terrible if I rehomed him?"

"No."

Too fast. She noticed.

"You didn't even think."

"Didn't need to."

Silence.

"You're trying to choose what's best for him."

"Yes."

"That's the job."

She breathed. Then: "The rescue has two possible homes they want to screen more carefully."

"Good."

"One is experienced with lorikeets."

"Good."

"The other..."

She stopped. I waited.

"The other is weird."

I smiled.

"Define weird."

"A retired couple with a converted travel trailer."

I looked at van.

"No."

Margaret laughed.

"They've traveled with parrots for years."

"No."

"They have an outdoor aviary setup when parked."

"No."

"Secure carrier system."

"No."

"Experience with nectar diets."

"Margaret."

"Yes?"

"Why are you telling me this?"

She was quiet.

"I don't know."

I did. Probably. Still.

"No conclusions from ten minutes."

"You're impossible."

"Rare."

She laughed again.

"The rescue is going to evaluate both."

"Good."

"Nothing decided."

"Better."

Another pause.

"Echo keeps doing your whistle."

"That's a defect."

"I know."

We hung up. I sat in turnout. Blaze watched from back. Katniss sat on passenger seat. I looked at both.

"Not our problem."

Blaze's tail moved. Katniss blinked. I started engine. Not our problem. True. Not meaningless. Also true. We drove another hour. The landscape opened. Forest broke into pasture. Low hills. Big sky. Clouds layered west. Late light beginning. I saw an old barn. Not picturesque enough to stop. Good barn. Working barn. A little farther, abandoned schoolhouse. Too picturesque. I kept driving. Discipline.

Then road curved. A line of trees opened. Sunlight crossed a field where fog still sat low from a shaded creek. I stopped. Safe shoulder. Camera. Blaze stayed in van. Katniss watched through open doorway. I walked twenty yards. Light moved. Fog thin. Fence line. Nothing dramatic. Waited. One beam reached an old gate. Gate bright. Everything else muted.

Click. Then gone. Keeper. I walked back. Katniss sat on side step. Not hood. Good geometry. I looked at her.

"Thank you for respecting mechanical reality."

She licked paw. Blaze's tail hit cabinet. Thunk. We found camp before sunset. Small county campground. River nearby. Few people. Site flat. Trees high. Good. Routine. Blaze out. Katniss out. Water. Food. Walk. Katniss climbed onto picnic table. Legal enough. Blaze placed stick beneath bench. I made dinner. No message. Good. I looked at empty shelf. Still empty.

Then at food cabinet. Too full. I moved one jar. Then another. Created a small space. Why? No reason. I stopped.

"Don't."

Katniss looked at me.

"I know."

I put everything back. Dinner finished. The river made low sound beyond trees. I opened notebook. Wrote: Carl: If you're not sure what something is yet, don't tell it. Then: Margaret thinks rehoming may be right. Rescue screening homes. Then: Not our problem. Still matters. I stared. That was enough. I closed notebook. Phone buzzed. Photo. Margaret. Echo on top of his carrier. Looking directly at camera.

Below: He bit me while I was trying to clean his perch. Recovery remains excellent. I laughed. Blaze looked up. Katniss did not. I replied: Strong medical progress. Then another message. I'll let you know what the rescue says. I typed: Okay. Sent. Nothing else. Perfect. Night came. I sat outside longer than usual. No camera. River. Trees. Stars appearing.

Blaze beside me. Katniss on picnic table. There were three of us. That had become ordinary. I thought about empty shelf. Martha's book moving on. Echo maybe moving again. Ray's van becoming mine without losing where it came from. Maybe nothing was missing. Maybe I had been treating every empty space as a question. Some weren't. Some were simply space.

I looked at Blaze. One dog. Katniss. One cat. Van. Unnamed. Road. Unfinished. Enough. For tonight, nothing needed to be added. Nothing needed to be decided. Nothing needed to return. I went inside. Katniss followed. Blaze followed. Stick followed. Of course. I turned off the light. The shelf stayed empty. And for the first time, I didn't look at it twice.

CHAPTER 33

A Home That Moves

The empty shelf survived the night. I checked. Not intentionally. Probably. Morning light came through the Volkswagen windows. Blaze was already awake. Katniss was not. Or pretended not to be. The stick remained beside Blaze's bed. One. Still. I made coffee. Looked at shelf. Nothing had appeared overnight. Good.

"See?" Katniss opened one eye. "Nothing needs to go there." She closed it.

I drank coffee. The river moved beyond the trees. A few birds called. Normal ones. I had stopped appreciating normal birds properly. Breakfast. Water. Pack. Check van. Oil good. Tires good. Window seal still technically a problem and emotionally an acquaintance. I wrote: Window seal. Eventually. Then stared at eventually. Dangerous word. Blaze walked over. Stick.

"No." Tail.

He dropped it. I looked at him.

"That's new."

Then he picked it back up. Balance restored. We left after eight. South. Still. The road followed the river for another twenty miles. Then climbed away. Fields became forest. Forest became hills. Katniss watched from passenger seat. Blaze slept. I drove.

No phone calls. I checked once around ten. Nothing. Good. I put it facedown. A sign appeared. SCENIC LOOP 12 MILES I turned. No thought. The loop climbed through second-growth forest. Narrow pavement. Occasional views through trees. No traffic behind us. Perfect.

Halfway up, I found a pullout overlooking a valley. Nothing famous. No interpretive sign. No designated photograph. Better. Blaze came out. Katniss followed. The valley held layers. Forest nearest. Pasture farther. Low clouds trapped along a ridge. A road barely visible below. I took the camera. Looked. Too much sky. Moved. Too much foreground. Moved again. Blaze sat beside me.

"You're not helping." Tail.

Katniss climbed onto a stump. I lowered camera.

“No.”

She sat beautifully. Of course.

“Manipulative.”

I waited. The clouds shifted. A strip of light moved across the valley. Not dramatic. Just enough to separate one hillside from another. Click. I checked. Good. Keeper. No animals. Again. I liked that too. We continued. The scenic loop returned to highway thirteen miles later. Twelve according to sign. Thirteen according to odometer. The Volkswagen and government disagreed. I trusted neither.

Around eleven, phone rang. Margaret. I found a safe turnout.

“Morning.”

“Hi.”

“Echo?”

“Fine.”

Good.

“He bit the veterinarian yesterday.”

“Excellent recovery.”

“That’s what she said.”

I smiled. Then Margaret went quiet. I waited.

“The rescue called.”

“Okay.”

“They finished the first round of screening.”

I looked out windshield.

“And?”

“The couple with the trailer isn’t going to work.”

That surprised me.

“Why?”

“They’re good people.”

“But.”

“They already have two parrots.”

I waited.

“One of them didn’t react well to recordings of lorikeet calls.”

“Territorial?”

“Maybe. Stress. Agitation. They don’t want to risk it.”

“Reasonable.”

“That’s what the rescue said.”

Good.

"The other home?"

"Experienced."

Pause.

"But they want a quieter bird."

I stared ahead.

"Did they meet Echo?"

Margaret laughed.

"No."

"They should."

"That's what I said."

Echo apparently screamed in background. Even through phone. I smiled.

"Strong audition."

Margaret laughed. Then quiet again.

"There are other applicants."

"Good."

"Yes."

She didn't sound convinced. I waited. Then: "The rescue asked me something." There it was.

"What?"

"They asked whether there was anyone Echo already knew."

I said nothing. Margaret continued.

"I said me."

"Correct."

"They said besides me."

I looked at Katniss. She stared through windshield.

"No."

Margaret laughed softly.

"I didn't ask anything yet."

"You were about to."

"Maybe."

I leaned back.

"Margaret."

"I know."

"Dog."

"I know."

"Cat."

"I know."

"Volkswagen."

"I know."

"Travel."

"I know."

"Specialized nectar diet."

"I know."

"Climate."

"I know."

"Noise."

"I definitely know."

Echo screamed again.

"Demonstration helpful."

She laughed. Then: "They aren't suggesting you take him."

"Excellent."

"They're asking whether you'd be willing to let them evaluate the possibility."

I said nothing. That was different. Annoyingly.

"What does evaluate mean?"

"A meeting."

"We already had one."

"A real one."

I looked at the van interior.

"Define real."

"One of their bird-care people looks at your setup."

I stared at the faded cabinets.

"What setup?"

"Exactly."

"Margaret."

"I'm quoting them."

I closed eyes.

"What else?"

"They'd talk through travel housing, diet storage, temperature, sleeping, safety around Katniss, Blaze, emergency vets, everything."

“Then tell me no.”

“Maybe.”

“Efficient.”

“They might also tell you what would have to change.”

I looked at empty shelf. Absolutely not. I looked away from empty shelf.

“Where?”

Margaret gave location. Thirty-five miles from where we were. Of course.

“Today?”

“Only if you want.”

That phrase had become dangerous. I looked at Blaze. He was asleep. Katniss moved onto dashboard.

“No.”

Margaret said: “What?”

“Nothing.”

I thought. A meeting was not a bird. An evaluation was not a decision. Information was information.

“Fine.”

“Fine?”

“I’ll talk to them.”

Margaret exhaled. Too much.

“Do not make that sound important.”

“Sorry.”

“You’re not.”

“No.”

We hung up. I stared at phone. Blaze woke.

“Meeting.” Tail.

“Not that kind.”

Katniss looked at me.

“Especially not you.”

We drove. The rescue representative met us at a public park outside town. That was intentional. Neutral space. Good. Her name was Priya. Late thirties. Practical jacket. Clipboard. No dramatic bird-person accessories. I appreciated that. Margaret arrived separately. Echo in carrier. He heard the van. Whistle. My whistle. Still terrible. I closed eyes. Priya looked at me.

“That yours?”

“Unfortunately.”

Margaret laughed. Echo repeated it.

“He’s reinforcing behavior.” Priya said.

“Badly.”

We started with the Volkswagen. Priya did not romanticize it. Good. She looked inside. Measured. Asked questions. Ventilation? I showed her. Heat management? Current methods. Shade. Windows. Fans. Weather avoidance. Cold? Blankets. Heater options limited. No leaving animals unattended in unsafe temperatures.

“Parrots are less forgiving than dogs.”

“I assumed.”

“Good assumption.”

Travel carrier?

“None.”

“Perch?”

“None.”

“Food storage?”

I looked at dog food. Cat food. My food.

“Already crowded.”

She nodded.

“That’s honest.”

Katniss watched from inside. Priya pointed.

“Predator.”

Katniss blinked.

“She’ll be offended.”

“She’s still a predator.”

“I know.”

That part mattered most. Priya explained separation. Not supervision alone. Physical separation. Carrier when traveling. Secure enclosure when doors opened. No casual shared loose space. No assumption that familiarity meant safety.

“Even if the cat seems calm?”

“Especially then.”

Katniss continued looking innocent.

“She’s good at that.”

Priya did not smile. Good. Blaze came out next. Harnessed. Controlled. Echo remained in carrier several yards away. Blaze noticed. Tail. Priya watched. No lunging. No barking. Curious.

“Does he have prey drive?”

“Yes.”

Good to say.

“Birds?”

“He notices them. We’ve trained leave-it. He improves.”

“Would you trust him loose with Echo?”

“No.”

Immediate. Priya nodded.

“Correct answer.”

Blaze looked betrayed.

“Nothing personal.”

Tail. Then Katniss. Harness. Tether. Distance. She saw Echo. Everything became geometry again. Katniss crouched. Not fully. Enough. Priya watched.

“That.”

“I know.”

Margaret held Echo’s carrier farther away. Katniss stayed focused. I redirected her. Food. Movement. Distance. She eventually looked away. Priya made a note.

“Trainable?”

“Katniss?”

“Management.”

“Yes.”

“Not trust.”

“No.”

Good. We moved to picnic table. Echo came out on Margaret’s secure perch. Far from Katniss. Blaze farther still. He looked around. Trees. People. Van. Me. Whistle. I refused. Whistle again.

“No.”

Echo leaned sideways. Priya watched.

“He remembers you.”

“Apparently.”

Margaret smiled. I ignored both. Priya talked. A lot. Lorikeets weren’t simple travel companions. High-energy. Messy liquid droppings. Specialized nectar diet. Fresh food. Frequent cleaning. Safe temperatures.

Regular veterinary care. Mental stimulation. Social contact. Safe sleep. Secure transport. The list kept growing. I looked at Volkswagen.

“This is becoming an engineering project.”

“Yes.”

I liked her more. She continued. Travel could work. Some parrots adapted well. Some hated it. The bird had to be observed. Slow acclimation. Short drives first. Carrier desensitization. Stationary time in vehicle. Noise exposure. Rest.

“Not put him in and head for California.”

“Wasn’t planning to.”

“Good.”

Margaret said: “He already escaped once.” Priya nodded.

“Which means doors become procedures.”

I looked at Katniss.

“Already familiar with that concept.”

Priya smiled finally. Then came diet. Nectar powder formulated for lorikeets. Fresh portions. Changed frequently. Fruit in moderation. Clean water. Storage. Cleaning. I stared at the cabinet. The empty shelf. No. I looked away again. Priya noticed.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

She followed my line of sight.

“Storage?”

“No.”

“Could be.”

“No.”

Margaret looked away because she was trying not to smile. I pointed at her.

“Don’t.”

Echo whistled.

“Both of you.”

Priya asked why I traveled. That was harder than bird food.

“Because I like traveling.”

She waited.

“That’s it.”

“Good.”

I frowned.

"You expected something else?"

"People sometimes want animals to fix something."

I looked at Blaze. Katniss.

"They didn't."

"Good."

"They complicated it."

Margaret laughed. Priya nodded.

"Better answer."

I wasn't trying to pass anything. That bothered me. Then she asked: "How long do you stay places?"

"Depends."

"Hours?"

"Sometimes."

"Days?"

"Sometimes."

"Weeks?"

"Could."

"No deadline?"

"No."

"That helps."

Again. Trap. I looked at Echo. He was chewing the edge of his perch.

"No."

He ignored me. Priya said: "He doesn't know that's directed at him."

"Everybody else does."

Katniss looked away. Blaze lay down. Echo kept chewing.

"One out of three."

We spent almost two hours there. No decision. Good. Priya's conclusion was irritatingly reasonable.

"Could it work?" I asked.

"Possibly."

I closed my eyes.

"Not that word."

She looked confused. Margaret laughed.

"Long story."

Priya continued.

"It would require changes."

"How many?"

"Enough."

"Helpful."

"Secure travel carrier."

I wrote.

"Stationary perch setup."

Wrote.

"Separate safe zone from cat."

Wrote.

"Food and cleaning storage."

Wrote.

"Temperature monitoring."

Wrote.

"Avian first-aid plan."

Wrote.

"Vet planning along route."

Wrote.

"Gradual acclimation before any long travel."

Wrote.

"And willingness to stop if he hates it."

I looked up.

"Yes."

Priya nodded.

"That's the important one."

Good. Margaret looked at Echo. He looked at van. Again. I refused meaning. Still. Priya packed her clipboard.

"The rescue isn't offering him to you today."

"Excellent."

"We're not even recommending placement yet."

"Better."

"But if Margaret proceeds with rehoming, and if you wanted to be considered, we'd continue from here."

I looked at Margaret. She looked nervous. I looked at Echo. He whistled. I looked at Katniss. Predator. Blaze. Large. Volkswagen. Small. Road. Complicated.

"No decision today." I said.

Priya nodded.

"No decision today."

Best sentence remained undefeated. Margaret stayed after Priya left. We sat at picnic table. Echo on perch. Blaze beneath table. Katniss safely inside van. For once, nobody talked. Echo moved along perch. Then whistled. I ignored him. Again. Ignored. Third time. I whistled back. Margaret smiled.

"Don't."

"I didn't say anything."

"You did it with your face."

She looked away. Echo climbed down perch toward Margaret's arm. Then shoulder. He sat there. Quiet.

"Can I ask you something?" Margaret said.

"Apparently."

"If the rescue eventually said yes..."

I waited.

"...would you?"

There it was. I looked toward van. Blaze. Katniss. Shelf. Road.

"I don't know."

Margaret nodded. Good. No disappointment. No pressure.

"I don't either." she said.

Better. We sat. Echo suddenly flew from her shoulder. Secure tether stopped full distance. He landed on perch closer to me.

"That was dramatic."

Whistle. I looked at him.

"You have terrible timing."

He tilted head. Margaret said: "Diane used to say that." I looked at her.

"What?"

"That he had terrible timing."

I smiled.

"She was right."

Echo whistled. We stayed another twenty minutes. Then Margaret packed him. He objected. Healthy complaint. Before she left, she handed me something. A small printed sheet. Rainbow lorikeet care basics. Rescue contact. Emergency numbers. Diet notes. I stared.

"This feels manipulative."

"It's information."

"Information can be manipulative."

“Keep it anyway.”

I folded it. Put it in notebook. Not shelf. Important. Margaret drove away. Echo whistled once from inside carrier before door closed. Then gone. Again. I stood beside Volkswagen. Katniss jumped onto side step. Not hood. Good. Blaze stood beside her. I looked at both.

“You understand nothing.”

Tail. Blink.

“Good.”

We drove south. For about fifteen miles. Then stopped at a grocery store. I needed food. Actually. Inside: Bread. Coffee. Vegetables. Fruit. Dog food. Cat food. I passed pet aisle. Stopped. No. Kept walking. Then returned. Not bird supplies. Cleaning cloths. Small lidded storage container. Useful regardless. I stared at it.

“No.”

Put it back. Walked away. Returned. Bought it. For camera batteries. Obviously. Outside, I placed camera batteries inside. They fit. I looked at empty shelf. Placed container there. Shelf no longer empty. I immediately removed it.

“No.”

Katniss watched.

“Don’t.”

I put container in lower cabinet. Better. We continued. Afternoon clouded over. No rain. Soft light. Road crossed a broad open meadow. Old fence. Distant hills. I stopped at a public pullout. Camera. Blaze remained inside. Katniss stayed at door. I walked a little. Fence posts leaned different directions. One missing. Gap. The road beyond visible through it.

I raised camera. Too symbolic. Lowered. Waited. A raven landed on the far post. Better. Click. Raven left. I checked. Fence. Gap. Road. Bird. Keeper. Local bird. Excellent. At campground that evening, I cooked. Blaze had stick. Katniss had chair. Everything normal. Phone stayed silent. Good. I opened the care sheet. Read it again. Then put it away.

No decision. I checked photographs. Valley. Fence with raven. Fence photograph better. Not because of gap. I refused that interpretation. Probably. Notebook. I wrote: Rescue evaluation. Possible does not mean decided. Then: Katniss requires physical separation. No exceptions. Then: Travel could work only if Echo tolerates it. I stopped. Then: Do not buy bird supplies. I stared. That sounded familiar in a way I did not like.

Crossed out bird supplies. Wrote: Do not get ahead of the bird. Better. Blaze’s tail hit cabinet. Thunk. Katniss jumped inside. I looked at

shelf. Empty again. Still nothing missing. But for the first time, I could see exactly what might fit there. I didn't like that either. Outside, a bird whistled. Normal bird. Probably. Katniss's head lifted.

I looked at her.

"No."

She blinked. I looked at the road map. South. Still plenty. No destination. No deadline. No answer. Good. For now, a question was enough.

CHAPTER 34

The Difference Between Ready and Willing

The empty shelf was still empty when I woke. I noticed immediately, which was annoying. Katniss sat beneath it. Blaze occupied most of the floor. The Volkswagen smelled like coffee waiting to happen, damp forest, dog, yesterday's dinner, and whatever mysterious substance old vehicles used to remind you they had lived before you arrived. Home. Apparently. I looked at the shelf. "Nothing." Coffee first. Philosophy later.

The morning was colder than I expected. Not freezing. Just cold enough that breath would have shown if I'd had any. Small advantage. Blaze stepped outside and stretched. Front legs. Chest. Back legs. An entire geological event. Then he sniffed the morning as though something might have changed overnight. Katniss came after him. Harness. Tether. Side step. Ground. No statue routine. No argument.

That had become ordinary. I kept noticing ordinary things becoming ordinary. Maybe that was how most changes worked. Not through announcements. Just repetition until one morning you realized something difficult had quietly become part of breakfast. Food. Water. Coffee. Map.

South remained available. East too. West held the ocean. North held everything we'd already traveled through. I looked at the map. Folded it. No vote. My phone sat silent beside the coffee. I checked it once. No messages. Katniss watched me. "Administrative." Blaze appeared carrying the stick.

"One." Tail.

I had said that so often it had become less a command and more a household doctrine. We packed. Before leaving, I checked the repair list. Window seal. Cabinet latch. Rear click. Nothing urgent. Nothing currently attempting to strand us. Good.

Then the bird-care sheet slipped from my notebook and landed on the floor. I stared at it. Katniss took one step toward it.

"No."

I picked it up. Folded it again. Put it back inside the notebook. Not on the shelf. Important. We left around eight-thirty. Still south. Still mostly. The road climbed away from the river. Trees crowded close. Low clouds hung across the hills. Openings appeared occasionally, then disappeared again.

No dramatic storm. No spectacular sunrise. No reason to stop every three miles. I appreciated that. Blaze watched the road for about fifteen minutes. Then slept. Katniss stayed awake longer. She had started watching differently. Not just movement now. Driveways. Buildings. Mailboxes. Places where trees opened into fields. People crossing yards. The road itself.

I wondered what any of it meant to her. Probably something. Possibly nothing. Cats were good at keeping interpretation private. A brown highway sign appeared ahead. FIRE LOOKOUT HISTORIC SITE 6 MILES I turned. Obviously. The pavement lasted about two miles. Then gravel. I stopped. Looked ahead. Looked at the Volkswagen. Old van. Gravel road. Uphill.

“Maybe.”

I immediately regretted saying it. Blaze lifted his head.

“No.” He looked at me. “That word has done enough damage.”

I checked the map. Public road. Seasonally maintained. No closure. Dry weather. Nothing obviously stupid. Fine. Slowly. The Volkswagen climbed. Cabinet rattle. Door whistle. Rear click. Different pieces of the vehicle contributing their opinions. Katniss moved from the passenger seat to the lower bench. Reasonable. Blaze stayed down. Even better.

The lookout was gone. That was the first thing I learned when we arrived. The road ended at a small parking area with an interpretive sign. The tower had been removed years ago. Only four concrete footings remained. A short trail led toward the viewpoint. Dogs allowed on leash. Good. No rule specifically addressing cats. Civilization remained unprepared.

Katniss came. The trail was less than half a mile. Uphill. Easy enough. Blaze approved immediately. Katniss approved after about ninety feet of research. We climbed. The old tower footings sat in grass and brush. Four concrete blocks. Rusting bolts. No tower.

The sign explained that the lookout had once been part of a larger fire-detection network. Observers watched the surrounding country for smoke and reported fires by radio or telephone. As roads improved, aircraft became more available, and detection systems changed, many isolated lookout sites were eventually retired.

I looked at the concrete. Another thing that had stopped doing what it had been built to do. I almost wrote that down. Didn’t. The road had

already given me enough metaphors. The viewpoint was farther ahead. Wide valley. Forested ridges. Low cloud. No ocean. I took the camera out. Looked. Nothing. Lowered it. Blaze sniffed grass. Katniss investigated one of the old concrete footings.

I waited. Cloud shifted. A ridge appeared. Not enough. Ten minutes. Blaze sat beside me. Katniss climbed onto the footing. I looked at her.

"No."

She sat perfectly.

"Still no."

I turned away. Then another ridge emerged behind the first. Then another behind that. Not dramatically. One layer at a time. Cloud lifting just enough to reveal distance. Camera up. Click. Wait. One more ridge appeared. Click. I checked the second frame. Keeper.

No animals. No tower. No evidence that we'd been there. Just layers of land appearing through cloud. Good. On the walk back down, Katniss stopped beside a patch of ferns. Blaze stopped. I stopped. We waited. Nothing.

"Important?"

A small bird hopped out. Brown. Ordinary. Entirely appropriate to the continent. Katniss watched.

"No."

The bird left. Progress. At the parking area, I saw the missed call. Margaret. I stared at the phone. Katniss climbed onto the side step.

"Don't."

I called back. She answered almost immediately. "Hi."

"Everything okay?"

"Yes."

"Echo?"

"Fine."

Good.

"He threw nectar on my wall."

"Better."

"That is not better."

"Strong energy."

She laughed. Then went quiet.

"The rescue called again."

Of course. I leaned against the Volkswagen. "And?"

"They want to do a trial."

I looked across the empty parking area. “What kind?”

“Not placement.”

“Good opening.”

“A travel-acclimation session.”

I said nothing.

“They said before anybody talks seriously about where Echo might live, they want to know whether travel is even something he tolerates.”

That made sense. Annoyingly.

“What happens?”

“Your van stays parked.”

“Parked.”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

“Carrier inside.”

“Okay.”

“Perch.”

“Okay.”

“Katniss physically separated.”

“Definitely.”

“Blaze restrained.”

“Yes.”

“Then Echo gets time to look around and settle.”

“No driving?”

“Not first.”

Better.

“If he’s calm, they might have you start the engine.”

I looked back at the Volkswagen. “That could scare him.”

“That’s part of what they need to know.”

Fair.

“If that goes well, they might try a very short drive another day.”

Another day. Good.

“They don’t want to stack stress.”

I liked that.

“When?”

“Tomorrow, if you’re still close.”

I looked south. “Close is flexible.”

“I’ve noticed.”

She hesitated.

“You don’t have to do this.”

“I know.”

That sentence had become part of our relationship. I thought about the care sheet. The shelf. The animals. The van. Then something more important.

“Margaret.”

“Yes?”

“Are you asking because you want me to take him?”

Silence. Long enough to matter.

“No.”

I waited.

“I think I want him somewhere he’ll be happy.”

“That’s not the same answer.”

“I know.”

Another pause.

“I don’t know what I want.”

Better.

“Okay.”

“I don’t want to push you.”

“Then don’t.”

“I’m trying not to.”

“Good.”

She laughed quietly.

“I also don’t want to reject something just because it sounds strange.”

I looked at the scene around me. Skeleton. One-hundred-seventeen-pound dog. Traveling cat. Old Volkswagen.

“That standard would eliminate most of my life.”

“Exactly.”

I smiled.

“Tomorrow.”

“Really?”

“Trial.”

“Trial.”

“Not decision.”

"Not decision."

Good. She gave me the location. County park near the rescue. Large parking area. Usually quiet on weekdays. I wrote it down. We hung up. I stood there a moment. Blaze watched me.

"Tomorrow there might be a bird in the van."

Tail.

"Temporarily."

More tail.

"That distinction matters."

Katniss sat in the doorway. I looked at her. "You are going to hate this." Blink.

"Good talk."

We continued south. But not very far. That was deliberate. I chose roads that kept us within about an hour of tomorrow's meeting. Not commitment. Logistics. Different category. Around noon, we reached a small town near a reservoir. Fuel. Groceries. No laundry required. A luxury. I bought coffee. Bread. Dog food. Cat food. Fruit. Vegetables. Actual vegetables. I passed the pet aisle. Kept walking.

Good. Then remembered cleaning supplies. I stopped. Not bird supplies. Cleaning supplies. Entirely normal cleaning supplies. Paper towels. Unscented cloths. Trash bags. I looked into the basket at checkout. Suspicious. The clerk did not care. Excellent. Outside, I loaded everything into the Volkswagen. The shelf stayed empty. Paper towels would have fit. I didn't put them there. Blaze sniffed the grocery bags. "No."

Katniss inspected another. "Also no." Everything eventually found a place. Barely. I stood in the doorway and looked at the interior. Carrier tomorrow. Somewhere. Something would have to move. Camera bag? No. Books? Maybe. Food? No. Blaze? Absolutely not. Katniss? She would appeal. I started rearranging things in my head. Stopped.

"No."

I closed the door. Tomorrow could have tomorrow's problems. Lunch at the reservoir. Public picnic area. Shade. Quiet. Blaze beneath the table. Katniss on the bench. Water flat enough to hold the clouds. A few boats far out. I took no photographs. Good place. No photograph. Both could be true. I ate. My phone buzzed. Margaret. A picture.

Echo hanging upside down from the top of his enclosure. He is practicing dignity. I laughed. Blaze sniffed the phone when I showed him. Katniss stared at Echo longer than was comfortable.

"Still predator."

She looked at me.

"Priya said so."

Katniss washed her paw. Discussion closed. We walked along the reservoir afterward. Flat trail. Easy. Blaze carried no stick. I noticed.

"Where is it?"

He looked at me. Probably in the van. Good. Five minutes later, he found another. Of course. He picked it up.

"Temporary."

Tail. I let him carry it to the next bench. Then traded him a treat. Stick stayed behind. Progress. Katniss walked steadily. Harness slack most of the time. We passed a family with two dogs. Both barked. Blaze looked. Stayed with me.

"Good."

Katniss moved closer to my leg. Also good. I realized something. Tomorrow wasn't only about Echo. If he was going to sit near us in a carrier, the most useful thing Blaze and Katniss could do was nothing. Doing nothing was harder than it sounded. When we returned to the Volkswagen, I didn't drive.

I opened the side door. Set the chair outside. Blaze tethered near me. Katniss on the opposite side, safely separated. Then we sat. No walk. No food. No destination. No camera. Just nothing. Blaze lasted three minutes before standing.

"Down."

He did. Katniss lasted seven before trying to investigate beneath the van. Redirect. Ten minutes. A crow landed nearby. Katniss noticed. Blaze noticed.

"No."

Both stayed. Interesting. Fifteen minutes. Truck passed. Blaze looked. Katniss didn't. Twenty minutes. Absolutely nothing happened. Perfect. Treats.

"Good."

Blaze's tail moved. Katniss accepted payment with professional detachment. Another ten minutes. Enough. Not training for Echo. Obviously. General calm behavior. Entirely unrelated. I wrote a note. Then noticed I had written Echo in the margin. I crossed it out. Fine. We drove another half hour. Forest again. Afternoon light slanting between trunks.

A public pullout appeared beside an old gravel road closed to vehicles but open to foot traffic. Dogs permitted. We walked. Katniss came too. The old road climbed gently. Wheel tracks fading. Grass between them. I carried the camera. Nothing. Fine.

A young tree grew directly from one of the old tire tracks. Maybe six feet tall. Road becoming forest. Again. Too obvious. I kept walking. Farther up, sunlight found a spiderweb stretched between two dead branches. Tiny droplets from the morning still clung to it. I stopped. No mountain. No dog. No cat. No metaphor required. Camera. I moved closer. Dark background. Web catching light.

Click. Lower angle. Click. Second frame. Better. Keeper. Blaze investigated the base of one branch. Katniss stared at something that did not exist for me. Neither cared about the photograph. That helped. We found a campground about twenty minutes from tomorrow's park. Also deliberate. Quiet. Small. Routine came easily now. Park. Water. Food. Walk. Then Blaze's original stick appeared.

I stared.

"You had it the whole time."

Tail. I had been outmaneuvered again. Katniss claimed the chair. Normal. I made dinner. Then looked inside the van. Tomorrow. Carrier. Perch. Bird. I moved the camera bag. Stopped. Put it back. Then moved it again. Books shifted six inches. Cleaning supplies lower. Camera bag beneath bench. Nothing permanent. Enough floor space for a properly secured carrier. There.

I stared at it. Not the shelf. Floor space. Practical. Katniss climbed inside. Walked directly into the cleared area. Sat. I stared at her.

"Of course."

She curled up.

"That isn't yours."

Purr.

"Temporary."

Purr. I picked her up. Moved her. She returned. I moved her again. She returned again. Blaze watched.

"Do not learn this."

Eventually I put a folded cardboard box in the space. Katniss sat on the box. I closed my eyes.

"Fine."

Tomorrow could solve itself. After dinner, I checked the day's photographs. Clouded ridges. Spiderweb. The web was better. Small. Quiet. Structure defined mostly by empty space between threads. I refused to write that down. Discipline. I opened the notebook.

Tomorrow: acclimation only. Then: Carrier secured. Katniss separated. Blaze restrained. No loose introductions. No driving unless rescue recommends it later. I looked over the list. Added: No decisions.

Underlined once. My phone buzzed. Margaret. Tomorrow still okay? I typed: Yes. Three dots appeared. Stopped. Appeared again. Stopped. Finally: Thank you. I started typing: It's only a trial. Stopped. Deleted it.

She knew. I knew. No reason to keep saying it. I sent: See you tomorrow. Phone down. Stars began appearing between the trees. Blaze lay beside the Volkswagen. Katniss occupied the chair. I sat on the side step. Behind me, the cleared floor space was visible. Small. Enough for a carrier. The shelf above it remained empty. Interesting.

Ready. That was probably the word Priya would use. Was the Volkswagen ready? No. Could it become ready? Maybe. I almost said the word. Didn't. Willing was different. Ready was equipment. Space. Food. Safety. Temperature. Routes. Emergency plans. Willing was something I couldn't put on a checklist. I looked at Blaze. That had taken time. Katniss had mostly decided for herself and informed me afterward.

The Volkswagen had taken longer than either of them. Now there was Echo. Not ours. Not arriving tomorrow to stay. Just visiting. I knew that. Still, I had moved the camera bag. That bothered me. Katniss jumped down from the chair. Walked into the van. Stepped onto the box occupying the future carrier space. Sat. I looked at her.

"Point made."

Purr. Blaze's tail hit the ground. Thunk. I smiled. Tomorrow might tell us Echo hated the van. Useful. It might tell us Katniss made the entire arrangement impossible. Useful. Maybe Blaze couldn't settle with him nearby. Useful. Maybe I would realize I didn't want any of this. Also useful. And maybe none of those things would happen. That would be information too.

I turned off the light. No decisions tonight. Just enough room to learn the difference between being ready for something and being willing to let it happen.

CHAPTER 35

The Trial Run

I woke before the alarm. That was irritating. The alarm had one job. Katniss was already awake. Of course. She sat on the folded cardboard box I had used to block the cleared floor space. The future carrier space. Temporary future carrier space. Very temporary. I looked at her. “No.” She blinked.

“You’re making a point.”

She yawned. Blaze stretched below. One stick. Still. Coffee. Breakfast. Water. Checks. I moved the cardboard box. Katniss moved with it.

“That is not the assignment.”

I set it on the bench. She sat on it there instead. Fine. The empty floor space returned. Enough for a secured carrier. Nothing more. I looked at it. Then away. Today was information. That was all. I checked the list from last night. Carrier secured. Katniss separated. Blaze restrained. No loose introductions. No driving unless rescue recommends it later. No decisions.

Good list. I added: Do not improvise. Blaze walked over. Tail.

“That includes you.”

His tail continued. We left camp early. The park was twenty minutes away. I drove thirty-five. Not because I was avoiding it. Because I took the wrong road. Mostly. The county park sat beside a wide river. Large parking area. Open grass. Picnic shelter. Walking path. Not crowded. Good. I arrived first. That helped. I parked beneath trees. Not deep shade. Enough.

Then waited. Blaze looked out. Katniss looked out. I looked at phone. No messages.

“Excellent.”

Ten minutes later, Margaret arrived. Then Priya. Echo announced himself before either door opened. Whistle. My whistle. I closed my eyes. Katniss’s head turned instantly.

“No.”

Blaze stood.

“Also no.”

Priya walked over first. Clipboard. Carrier straps. Small travel perch. A digital thermometer. A roll of paper towels. Professional optimism. Dangerous.

“Morning.”

“Apparently.”

She looked at the van. “Ready?”

“No.”

“Good.”

I frowned.

“Why good?”

“People who say yes usually haven’t thought enough.”

Fair. Margaret approached with Echo’s carrier. Echo whistled. I ignored him. Another whistle. Still ignored. Third. I whistled back. Margaret smiled.

“Don’t.”

“I said nothing.”

“You did it with your face.”

Apparently contagious. Priya opened the side door. Inspected the cleared floor space.

“Better.”

“Temporary.”

“Everything is.”

I did not need philosophy from bird rescue before coffee had fully committed. We secured the carrier low and stable. Not near the door. Not where Blaze could reach. Not where Katniss could stare directly into it from six inches away. That eliminated most of the Volkswagen.

“We’re working with geometry.” I said.

Priya nodded. “Most animal care is geometry.” Good. Katniss was moved into the separated rear section with her harness and tether arranged safely. No access to Echo. No access to door. No opportunity for sudden inspiration. She looked offended.

“You are a predator.”

Blink.

“Professional opinion.”

She sat down with her back to me. Blaze remained secured in his travel position. Harnessed. Enough room to settle. Not enough to investigate carrier. He sniffed. Echo heard him. Whistle. Blaze's ears lifted.

"Easy."

He looked at me. Then carrier. Then me. Good. Margaret placed Echo's carrier inside. Door closed. Secure. Everything changed. Not dramatically. But the van felt different. Sound first. Tiny foot movements. Beak clicking. A little metallic chatter. Blaze watched. Katniss watched from farther away. I watched everybody. Priya watched me.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"That means something."

"I'm watching whether you react to every sound."

"I am."

"Exactly."

Annoying. We left the engine off. Doors open only where safe. Cool morning. Good airflow. Echo looked through the carrier bars. Not panicked. Alert. He moved once. Twice. Climbed to the side. Whistle. I did not respond. Another. Still didn't. He made a sharp clicking sound. Priya wrote something.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Clipboard means something."

She smiled.

"Settling behavior."

"Positive?"

"Neutral."

I hated neutral. Blaze lay down after four minutes. Good. Katniss took longer. She remained upright. Eyes fixed. Priya noticed.

"Redirect her."

I used a treat. Katniss glanced at it. Then back to Echo.

"Strong."

Another treat. Closer. She finally broke focus. Ate. Then looked back.

"Progress?"

"Management."

Right. We sat for fifteen minutes. Echo moved around inside carrier. Not frantic. Not still. Interested. He watched outside. Watched me.

Watched Margaret. Watched Blaze. Katniss watched Echo. Circle of poor decisions. Priya said: “Start the engine.” I looked at her.

“Now?”

“Now.”

“Okay.”

I climbed into driver’s seat. Turned key. The Volkswagen coughed. Caught. Settled into idle. Echo froze. Completely. I looked back. Priya held up one hand. Wait. We waited. Ten seconds. Twenty. Echo stayed still. Thirty. Then one foot moved. He climbed lower. Not panic. Not calm. Processing. Blaze lifted his head. Katniss looked toward front. Echo made one short sound.

Not whistle. Something softer. Margaret said nothing. Good. Priya watched. One minute. Two. Echo shifted again. Then started preening one shoulder. Priya nodded.

“Good.”

I exhaled.

“You were holding your breath?”

“Figure of speech.”

She looked at me.

“Skeleton.”

“Occupational hazard.”

Margaret laughed. Echo whistled. I answered before thinking. Priya wrote something.

“That was not data.”

“Everything is data.”

Terrible profession. We kept engine running five minutes. Echo settled enough to eat a small amount of prepared nectar Margaret had brought. That mattered. Priya nodded again.

“Very good.”

Blaze remained down. Katniss remained irritated but manageable. Nobody exploded. Excellent baseline. Engine off. Echo relaxed almost immediately. Interesting. Priya said: “Next step would be movement.” I looked at her.

“Today?”

“Short.”

Margaret looked surprised too. Priya continued. “Only if everyone is comfortable.” I looked at Echo. Carrier. Blaze. Katniss. Road.

“How short?”

“Parking lot loop.”

That sounded ridiculous. Good.

"Fine."

We closed doors. Checked carrier anchor. Checked harnesses. Checked temperature. Checked door latches. Checked again.

"Now?"

Priya nodded. I started engine. Echo went still again. Less than before. Good. I put the Volkswagen in gear. Rolled forward. Five miles an hour. Maybe. The van creaked. Carrier stayed secure. Echo leaned slightly with movement. Adjusted. Blaze watched through side window. Katniss crouched lower. We made one slow loop around parking area. No whistle. No screaming. No frantic flapping.

Nothing. That felt enormous. We stopped. Engine off. Echo immediately climbed higher. Whistled. Margaret laughed. Priya smiled.

"That's encouraging."

There it was. Dangerous word.

"Encouraging is not conclusion."

"No."

"Good."

Priya made notes. Then: "Another loop." I looked at her.

"You're enjoying this."

"Immensely."

Second loop. Slightly faster. Still parking-lot slow. Echo watched through carrier. Head moving. Body adjusting. At one point he leaned toward window side. Curious. Not hiding. Good. Katniss stared at him once. Then at passing grass. Better. Blaze yawned. Best. We stopped again. Priya opened door. Checked everybody.

"That's enough."

Good. I hadn't realized I wanted her to say that. Margaret took Echo out onto his secure perch once we were safely outside and separated from the other animals. He stretched wings. Not full flight. Just stretch. Then whistled. I whistled back. He climbed toward Margaret's shoulder. Looked at the van. Then me. Then van. I looked away.

No meaning. Priya said: "He tolerated it well."

"Tolerated."

"Good word."

I nodded.

"Would you say enjoyed?"

"No."

Better.

“Could he learn to enjoy it?”

“Possibly.”

I winced. Margaret laughed. Priya continued. “That’s what gradual acclimation is for.”

“So what now?”

“Nothing today.”

Best answer.

“If Margaret continues rehoming, and if you’re still willing to be evaluated, another session could be a short road drive. Ten minutes. Maybe fifteen.”

I looked at Margaret. She looked at Echo. Then me.

“No pressure.”

“I know.”

Priya packed the thermometer.

“One thing.”

“What?”

“If you do another session, the van needs a more permanent carrier anchor point.”

I looked inside.

“Permanent?”

“Secure.”

“Different word.”

She smiled.

“Secure.”

Good.

“And ideally a dedicated storage bin for nectar supplies and cleaning materials.”

I looked at empty shelf. No. Did not look at empty shelf. Margaret noticed.

“You’re doing that thing.”

“What thing?”

“Looking at where something would fit.”

“I am not.”

“You absolutely are.”

Echo whistled.

“Nobody asked you.”

We walked around the park afterward. Margaret with Echo in carrier. Blaze with me. Katniss stayed safely in van for a few minutes with ventilation and shade, because she'd had enough bird diplomacy for one morning. The river moved broad and slow. Cottonwoods along bank. A few fishermen. Nothing spectacular. Margaret said: "You don't have to keep doing this."

"I know."

"You're saying that less convincingly."

"I know."

We walked. After a while: "Did Diane travel with him?" I asked. Margaret smiled. "Not like this."

"What did they do?"

"She took him everywhere she reasonably could."

"Car?"

"Yes."

"Carrier?"

"Eventually."

I looked at her.

"Eventually?"

"Echo hated it at first."

Interesting.

"How bad?"

"Very."

"Useful information to share earlier."

"I forgot."

"Convenient."

She laughed.

"Diane started with him in a carrier in the parked car."

I stopped.

"Exactly what we're doing."

"Yes."

"Then short drives."

"Yes."

I stared.

"You really forgot?"

"Honestly."

Echo made a sound from carrier. I looked at him.

"You have history."

Whistle.

"Unhelpful."

Margaret continued. Trips to parks. Her mother's house. Vet. Friend's place. Nothing long-distance.

"But he knew cars."

"Years ago?"

"Yes."

That mattered.

"Could explain why this went easier."

"Maybe."

I tolerated the word. Barely. At the river, I took the camera out. Margaret looked at me.

"Photo?"

"Maybe."

Echo's carrier stayed out of frame. Not because I was avoiding him. Because the river was better. Light came through cloud gaps. The water stayed gray except for one bright strip where sun crossed it. A fisherman stood far downstream. Tiny. I framed. Waited. The strip of light moved. Touched the far bank. Click. Checked. Keeper. Quiet. Good.

No bird. That felt important. Maybe not. We returned to van. Katniss was asleep. Actually asleep. Priya had been right. Management, not trust. But progress still existed. Blaze drank water. Echo whistled. Katniss woke.

"No."

She looked at me.

"Just maintaining standards."

Margaret loaded carrier into her SUV. Echo complained.

"Healthy." I said.

"Very."

Then she stood beside her door.

"Would you do another session?"

I looked at Volkswagen.

"No decision today."

"Not what I asked."

Annoying. I thought.

"Yes."

She nodded. No smile. Good.

"When?"

"After Priya says."

"Good."

"Still not placement."

"I know."

"Still not adoption."

"I know."

"Still not..."

"Bone."

I stopped.

"Right."

She drove away. I watched until she turned out of park. Then I looked at van. Katniss on passenger seat. Blaze behind. Empty carrier space. Again. I climbed inside. Blaze's tail moved.

"Don't."

Thunk. We continued south. For almost an hour, I thought about nothing. Successfully. Then I passed a hardware store. Kept going. Two miles later, I turned around.

"No." I said to nobody.

I parked. Inside, I bought: Two small bolts. A metal bracket. Washers. Locking nuts. A rubber-backed tie-down plate. The clerk looked at items.

"Project?"

"Maybe."

I closed my eyes. He didn't understand. Better. Outside, I stared at bag. Secure carrier anchor point. Nothing more. Safety improvement. Could be used for cargo. Camera equipment. Anything. I put bag in lower cabinet. Not shelf. Katniss watched.

"Cargo."

Blink.

"General cargo."

She looked away. Blaze panted.

"Both of you are terrible."

Lunch happened late. Small roadside rest area. I ate. Blaze ate. Katniss pretended not to care about my food. No calls. Good. I walked them

both afterward. Blaze found a stick. One. He carried it. Katniss investigated a concrete drainage pipe. I redirected. Normal. Very normal. Afternoon brought a long stretch of road through farmland. Low hills. Clouds thinning.

I stopped once for a photograph. Old fence. Field. A lone tree bent by years of wind. Nothing moving. I framed. Waited. A shadow crossed the field. Tree stayed lit. Click. Good. Keeper. Two photographs today. River light. Tree. No people. No animals. I liked that. Campground that evening sat near a small lake. Half empty. Quiet. I parked.

Routine. Blaze out. Katniss out. Water. Food. Walk. I did not install the hardware. Important. I set bag on floor. Katniss sniffed it.

"Cargo."

She walked away. After dinner, I looked at photographs. River. Tree. Tree stronger. Bent. Still standing. Too symbolic. I did not write anything about it. Discipline. Notebook. Echo tolerated parked van. Engine okay. Two slow parking-lot loops okay. No panic. Ate nectar while engine running. Then: Katniss manageable with physical separation. Blaze settled. Then: Next session maybe short road drive.

I stared at maybe. Left it. Then: Bought anchor hardware. That looked bad. I added: For cargo. Worse. Crossed out entire line. Katniss jumped onto notebook.

"Thank you."

Purr. I moved her. She returned. Fine. Phone buzzed. Margaret. Priya says Echo did better than she expected. I read. Another: She also says that means absolutely nothing beyond today. I smiled. Typed: I like Priya. Sent. Then another message. A photo. Echo asleep on Margaret's shoulder. Head tucked. Quiet. No caption. I looked at it. Longer than necessary.

Then put phone down. Blaze slept near floor. Katniss took chair. There were still three of us. I looked at carrier space. Empty. Not missing. Different. The hardware bag sat nearby. I did not touch it. Outside, lake reflected the last light. I took camera. Walked twenty feet. Stopped. Looked. Beautiful. No photograph. I went back. Some things didn't need documentation.

Inside, I closed notebook. Today had not answered anything. Good. It had only removed a few reasons to say no. That was not the same as yes. Important distinction. I turned off the light. Blaze shifted. Stick rolled. Katniss jumped inside. The hardware bag stayed where it was. Tomorrow I could install it. Or not. The road would continue either way.

For now, that was enough.

CHAPTER 36

Ten Minutes South

The hardware bag was still on the floor when I woke. I noticed before coffee. That was becoming a problem. Katniss noticed too. She sniffed it. Then sat beside it.

“Cargo.”

Blink. Blaze stretched. One stick. Still. I looked at the bag again. Two bolts. Bracket. Washers. Locking nuts. Tie-down plate. Nothing emotionally significant about any of those things. Metal did not have opinions. Usually. Coffee. Breakfast. Water. I checked my phone. Nothing. Good. Then I checked again. Still nothing. Better. Katniss watched.

“Administrative.”

She yawned. I picked up the hardware bag. Put it on the bench. Then moved it back to the floor. Blaze watched.

“Don’t.”

Tail. The carrier anchor was a safety improvement. That was true whether Echo ever entered the van again or not. Cargo shifted. Camera bags shifted. Books shifted. One hundred seventeen pounds of dog shifted. Securing things was sensible. I took out the bracket. Looked at it. Katniss stepped onto the cardboard box that still occupied the cleared space.

“You’re interfering with engineering.”

Purr. I moved her. She returned.

“Fine.”

I installed the anchor. Not quickly. Old metal required respect. Also suspicion. I checked beneath the mounting point. No fuel line. No wiring. No structural surprise. Measured twice. Then again. Drilled once. Katniss hated the drill. She relocated to the passenger seat. Blaze remained outside with his harness secured to a picnic table. He watched. Concerned.

“Noise.”

Tail. The bracket went in. Backing plate beneath. Washers. Locking nuts. Rubber between metal where useful. Tight. Not decorative. I pulled against it. Hard. Nothing moved. Good. I stared at it.

“Cargo.”

Nobody argued. I put the camera bag there. Secured it. Pulled. Stayed.

“See?”

Katniss looked away. I removed the camera bag. That felt worse. Coffee helped. At nine, Priya called.

“Morning.”

“Hardware installed.”

She paused.

“I didn’t ask yet.”

“I know.”

“That’s interesting.”

“No.”

She laughed.

“Margaret told me you’d probably do it.”

“Margaret is becoming unreliable.”

“She said you’d say that too.”

I looked at phone.

“Conspiracy.”

Priya had spoken with Margaret. Echo had been normal overnight. Normal for Echo apparently meant eating, yelling, dismantling something, sleeping, then waking before Margaret wanted him to. Healthy.

“Still interested in the short drive?”

Priya asked.

“Interested is aggressive.”

“Willing?”

I looked at the anchor.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

“That doesn’t mean anything.”

“I know.”

“You’re all learning.”

“I’ve noticed.”

We agreed to meet around eleven at the same county park. Ten to fifteen minutes driving. Quiet road. Return to park. Stop if Echo showed

distress. No heroics. No proving anything. Good. I packed slowly. Not because of meeting. Because packing slowly was better. Books. Camera. Food. Water. Dog. Cat. Stick. One stick. Blaze carried it into the van.

"Apparently."

He lay down. Stick between paws. Katniss took the passenger seat. I looked at the anchor. Nothing attached. For now. We left. The park was only twenty-three minutes away. I drove thirty. This time intentionally. A farm road looped around a low hill. No reason. Good road. Clouds hung high. Light flat. No photographs. That was fine.

When we reached the park, Margaret was already there. Echo was inside the carrier. He whistled when I parked. I did not answer. Second whistle. Still nothing. Third. I whistled. Margaret leaned against her SUV.

"Strong boundaries."

"Developing."

Priya arrived a few minutes later. She inspected the anchor. Pulled it. Looked underneath. Checked placement.

"Good."

I tried not to look pleased.

"Don't encourage him," Margaret said.

Priya looked at her.

"Why?"

"He'll build an aviary by Thursday."

"No."

Echo whistled.

"Nobody asked you."

We loaded carefully. Carrier secured to the anchor. Two points. Stable. No sway. Blaze harnessed and separated. Katniss in her safe rear area with physical barrier. No direct access. Priya checked thermometer. Cool day. Good. Margaret sat in passenger seat. That was new. I looked at her.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You made a face."

"Passenger seat usually belongs to a cat."

Katniss stared from behind barrier. Margaret turned.

"Sorry."

Katniss did not forgive. Priya rode separately behind us. If we stopped, she stopped. Simple. I started the engine. Echo went still. Less than last

time. Then shifted. One foot. Other foot. Whistle. I looked forward. Margaret smiled.

"Don't."

"I didn't."

"You almost did."

Blaze lay down. Katniss watched carrier. Then window. Good. I put the van in gear. Parking lot first. One slow loop. Echo adjusted. No frantic movement. No screaming. Then we reached the exit. I stopped. Not traffic. Decision. Margaret looked at me.

"Still okay?"

"Yes."

I pulled onto the road. Ten minutes south. That was the plan. The road followed the river. Two lanes. Light traffic. Forty-five miles an hour. I drove forty. The Volkswagen made its usual sounds. Cabinet. Door. Rear click. Engine. Wind. Echo heard all of it. He moved lower in the carrier when a truck passed. Then climbed back up.

Good. Margaret watched him without staring. She was getting better at that. Blaze looked once. Then returned to window. Katniss watched Echo longer.

I said:

"Katniss."

Her ears moved.

"Window."

She looked outside. Probably coincidence. Still. We drove. Two minutes. Echo whistled. My whistle. I answered. Priya's car remained behind us. Margaret looked over.

"He likes that."

"He has poor taste."

Echo whistled again. I did not respond. Three minutes. Road curved. Sun appeared. Bright patch moved through the van. Echo leaned toward it. Not afraid. Interested. Four minutes. He started chewing the carrier perch. Margaret exhaled.

"Good?"

"Probably."

I looked at her.

"You're not allowed to use that word."

She smiled. Five minutes. A motorcycle passed opposite direction. Loud. Echo startled. Wings opened once. I slowed. Not abruptly. Margaret stayed quiet. Echo froze. Then settled. No panic. I kept driving. Six

minutes. Blaze yawned. Best possible review. Seven. Katniss sat down. Better. Eight. Echo ate. Margaret looked at me.

"He's eating."

"I can see."

"That's good."

"Don't celebrate."

"I'm not."

She was. Quietly. Nine. Priya called through hands-free.

"How is he?"

Margaret answered.

"Eating."

Priya paused.

"Good."

I smiled.

"Everybody keeps saying that."

Ten minutes. There was a pullout beside river. I turned in. Stopped. Engine off. Silence expanded. Echo immediately climbed higher in carrier. Whistle. I whistled back. Margaret laughed.

"Ten minutes."

"Approximately."

"You timed it?"

"Of course."

I looked at dashboard clock. Nine minutes and forty-two seconds.

"Close enough."

Priya parked behind us. We opened doors carefully. No animals loose. Priya checked Echo. Breathing. Posture. Feet. Eyes.

"Good."

Again. She looked at me.

"Sorry."

"You aren't."

"No."

Blaze came out on leash. Water. Quick break. Katniss stayed inside at first. Then stepped into her harnessed safe zone near the doorway. No direct access to carrier. Echo watched her. Katniss watched Echo. Priya watched both. I watched Priya.

"You're doing the clipboard thing without clipboard."

"Internal clipboard."

Worse. Katniss sat. No crouch. No tail twitching. Just watching. Priya nodded.

"Better."

"Trust?"

"Management."

Right. We stayed fifteen minutes. River. Trees. Traffic occasionally. Echo preened. Margaret relaxed. I did not. Not completely.

Then Priya said:

"Return trip."

I looked at her.

"Same?"

"Same."

"Not longer?"

"No reason."

I liked that answer. We loaded. Checked. Secured. Katniss looked offended by her section again.

"Temporary injustice."

She turned her back. Blaze settled. Engine started. Echo went still. Then almost immediately relaxed. Faster than before. Interesting. We drove north. This time Margaret talked. Not much. Enough.

"Diane would have liked this."

I looked at road.

"The van?"

"Echo going somewhere."

I waited.

"She hated being home all the time."

"But worked from home."

"Exactly."

I smiled. Margaret continued. Diane had taken Echo on errands when weather and destination allowed. Short trips. Friends. Parks. Sometimes just drives.

"He'd ride in his carrier and yell at trucks."

"Reasonable."

"He hated buses."

"Also reasonable."

"He loved drive-through windows."

"Food?"

“People.”

That fit.

“What happened when Diane got sick?”

Margaret went quiet. I almost said forget it. Then she answered.

“Trips stopped.”

Simple. I nodded.

“Everything got smaller.”

That sentence stayed. Echo whistled. Margaret looked back.

“Then she was gone.”

Nothing to say. I watched road.

After a minute:

“And now?”

Margaret looked at Echo.

“I think maybe I’ve been trying to keep him in the last version of her life.”

There it was. I didn’t answer. She continued.

“Quiet house. Same perch. Same room. Same things.”

“Because they were hers.”

“Yes.”

“And his.”

“Yes.”

I thought of Ray’s curtains. Photo box. Compass. Van.

“You can keep history without freezing it.”

Margaret looked at me.

“Volkswagen again?”

“Unfortunately.”

She smiled. Echo started chewing.

“Apparently philosophy makes him hungry.”

Eight minutes. Then something unexpected. Echo whistled. Not my bad whistle. Three clean notes. Margaret answered with the same three. He repeated. She smiled. Different smile.

“Diane taught him that.”

I looked at her.

“He did it with her?”

“Every morning.”

Echo repeated. Margaret answered. For a few seconds, the Volkswagen held something older than any of us in it. Not mine. I kept driving.

Ten minutes. Park. Engine off. Echo climbed up. Whistled my ugly whistle immediately afterward. Moment ruined. Perfect. Margaret laughed hard enough to wipe her eyes.

"That's your contribution."

"Legacy."

Priya came over.

"How was return?"

"Fine."

Margaret nodded.

"He ate on first leg. Preened at stop. Settled faster on return."

Priya looked at me.

"You've been taking notes."

"No."

Margaret pointed at me.

"Internally."

Traitor. Priya inspected everybody again. No issues.

Then she said:

"I'd call that a successful short-drive trial."

Successful. Stronger than encouraging. Dangerous. I crossed my arms.

"What does successful mean?"

"That today did not give us a reason to stop considering travel."

Excellent wording.

"That's all?"

"That's all."

Good. Margaret looked relieved. I looked at carrier. Echo looked at me. Whistle. I ignored him. Second whistle. Ignored. Third. I answered. Priya smiled.

"Behavior reinforced."

"I know."

"Just checking."

She explained next steps. Not tomorrow. Good. Give Echo rest. Observe behavior at Margaret's. No stacking too many new experiences. If everyone still wanted to continue after a few days, another trial could be longer. Maybe twenty or thirty minutes. Possibly a stop. Maybe parked time at a new location. Not yet. Good.

"And we still haven't decided placement."

I said.

"No."

"Margaret still hasn't finalized rehoming."

Margaret shook her head.

"Not formally."

"Rescue still considering other homes."

Priya nodded.

"Yes."

"Good."

Margaret looked at me.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"That's contagious."

Apparently. We unloaded Echo. He came out onto his secure perch. Blaze watched from a distance. Tail moved once. Katniss remained behind barrier until Echo was fully away from van. No geometry today. Good. Margaret sat at picnic table with Echo. Priya left after another ten minutes. No clipboard. No drama. Then there were just us. Margaret. Echo.

Me. Blaze. Katniss inside. Van. Unnamed. I took Blaze for a short walk along river. When we came back, Margaret had Echo on shoulder. He was looking at Volkswagen. I noticed. Did not assign meaning.

"How does he look?"

Margaret asked.

"Colorful."

"You know what I mean."

"No."

She smiled.

"Fair."

Echo flew from her shoulder to the secure perch. Then leaned toward van. Not flight. Just body. Interested. I refused meaning harder. Margaret noticed.

"You're doing it again."

"What?"

"Not seeing something."

"I'm seeing everything."

"That's not what I said."

I looked at Echo. He looked at me. Then whistle.

"Annoying."

"Very."

We ate lunch at separate tables nearby. Margaret had brought food. I had food. Blaze had opinions. Katniss eventually came out after Echo was secured back in carrier and moved farther away. No interaction. Good. Katniss explored grass. Blaze lay beneath table. Echo made occasional sounds from Margaret's side. Normal enough. I looked at all of it. This was not family.

Not yet. Maybe not ever. Important. Still. It no longer felt impossible. That was different. Margaret left after lunch. No emotional goodbye. Good.

"Call you in a few days?"

"Okay."

"Unless rescue finds a perfect home tomorrow."

"That would be good."

She looked at me.

"You mean that?"

"Yes."

I did. That surprised me less than I expected. Echo needed a good home. Not specifically ours. If somebody better existed, good. Margaret nodded.

"Okay."

Echo whistled from carrier. I whistled back. Then they left. I watched the SUV until it disappeared. Katniss jumped onto the side step. I looked at her.

"Still three."

Blink. Blaze's tail moved. Thunk.

"Yes."

We stayed at the park another hour. No reason to leave. I took the camera to river. Light had changed. Clouds breaking. Water dark. One strip of brightness along far bank. I took one frame. Not enough. Waited. A small boat moved into the bright strip. Too obvious. Waited. Boat left. A heron landed on an old piling.

Better. Click. Heron lifted. Second frame. Wings open. Reflection broken beneath. Click. I checked. Second. Keeper. Local bird. Excellent. We continued south. Not far. I stopped at hardware store again. Different town. This was becoming suspicious. I bought nothing. Important. Walked aisles. Looked at storage bins. Small fans. Hooks. Rubber mats.

Nothing. Left. Victory. At the van, I realized I still had the care sheet in notebook.

Fine. We drove. Late afternoon found us on a two-lane road through open farmland. Cloud shadows moved over fields. No stop. I had enough photographs. That felt good too. At a small roadside market, I bought food. Dog food. Cat food. Fruit. Coffee. I looked at apples. No. Bought pears instead. This proved nothing. Campground that evening sat near low hills.

No river. No lake. Just trees and open sky. Quiet. Routine. Blaze out. Katniss out. Water. Food. Walk. Then I looked inside. Carrier space empty. Anchor point visible. I stared. Katniss entered. Sat directly in the carrier space.

"Of course."

Purr. I picked her up. Put her on bench. She returned.

"You're defending territory now?"

Purr. Blaze stepped in. Looked at her. Then at me.

"No coalition."

I left her there. Dinner. Afterward I opened notebook. **Short drive trial: 10 min south, stop, 10 min return.** **Echo startled once at motorcycle. Recovered.** **Ate during first leg.** **Settled faster second leg.** **No panic.** **Blaze settled.** **Katniss manageable with separation.**

Then: **Priya: Successful means no reason to stop considering travel. Nothing more.** Good sentence.

Then I wrote: **Margaret says Diane used to travel locally with Echo.** I paused.

Added: **Three-note whistle was theirs.** That mattered.

Then: **My whistle apparently now his too. Unfortunate.** Better. I closed notebook. Phone buzzed. Margaret. **He came home, ate, yelled at me, and is now asleep.**

Then: **I think today tired him out in a good way.**

I replied: **Good. Let him rest.** No hesitation. Sent. I looked at empty carrier space. Katniss still occupied it. No vacancy. Good. I checked today's photographs. River. Heron. Second frame was strong. Wings just open. Water broken. No drama beyond movement. Keeper. I thought about photographing the carrier in van earlier. Hadn't. Good. Some things were evidence. Some were memories.

Some were questions. Camera didn't need all of them. Outside, evening deepened. Blaze lay near chair. Katniss eventually surrendered the carrier space and took her usual chair. I sat on side step. The van smelled

normal again. Dog. Cat. Coffee. Old fabric. Road. No bird. Still. I could remember exactly where the carrier had been. That annoyed me.

Ready versus willing. Yesterday's problem. Today added another. Possible versus preferable. Just because something could work didn't mean it should. That mattered too. Echo might travel well. That did not mean he belonged with us. Somebody else might offer him more. A house. A dedicated aviary. Other lorikeets. More experience. Less cat. Hard to argue with less cat.

Katniss looked at me from chair.

"Objectively."

She washed paw. Blaze's tail moved. Thunk. I smiled. If Echo came to us someday, it should not be because he fit into an empty space. It should be because, after everybody had looked carefully, this was the place that fit him. Different direction. Important. I went inside. The carrier anchor caught my eye. Useful. Even empty. I turned off light.

Tomorrow we would continue south. No meetings. No trials. No bird. Just road. That sounded good. Probably.

CHAPTER 37

Proof of Passing Through

The next morning contained no bird. That was the plan. I appreciated when plans succeeded by absence. Blaze woke first. One stick. Still. Katniss occupied the passenger seat. The carrier space remained empty. The anchor remained installed. Nobody commented. Especially me. Coffee. Breakfast. Water. Map. South. Again. I looked at the road. Then the shelf. Still empty. Then the carrier space.

Also empty.

“Enough.”

Katniss opened one eye.

“I wasn’t talking to you.”

She closed it. We left just after eight. No meeting. No rescue. No Margaret. No Priya. No rainbow lorikeet evaluating my transportation. Just road. It felt strange. Not bad. Just quieter than it should have. The highway ran through low hills. Forest thinned. Pasture appeared. Then forest returned. The weather could not decide what kind of day it wanted.

Cloud. Sun. Cloud again. Blaze watched for twenty minutes. Then slept. Katniss watched longer. She had become interested in passing houses. Not every house. Certain ones. Porches. Barns. Open garages. People outside. Maybe she was comparing.

“You had options.”

She looked at me.

“Still do.”

She returned to the window. Good. About forty miles later, a sign announced a town large enough for three traffic lights. The first was red. The second was red. The third was also red.

“I think they coordinate.”

Blaze lifted his head.

“Against me.”

Katniss remained unconcerned with municipal politics. The town had a grocery store. A pharmacy. A diner. A library. A print shop. I

passed the print shop. Then stopped. Not immediately. That would have looked intentional. I circled the block.

The sign read: **COPIES PRINTS PHOTOS SHIPPING** I looked at the camera bag. Then at the stack of digital photographs that existed everywhere except paper. Ray had asked for pictures. Laura had asked for pictures. Michael had probably asked without admitting it. Evan definitely had. I parked. Cool day. Shade. Safe ventilation. Animals secure.

"Short."

Blaze looked at me. Katniss looked at the shop.

"You've heard that before."

Inside smelled like toner. Paper. Cardboard. Coffee from somewhere behind the counter. A man about my age looked up from a computer.

"Help you?"

"Possibly."

He waited.

"I want to print photographs."

"That's encouraging."

"What?"

"Most people come in wanting us to fix their printer."

"Can you?"

"No."

Good. His name was Marcus. Different Marcus. Names recycled too. He showed me the kiosk. Memory card. Phone. USB. Selections. Sizes. I sat. This should have been easy. It wasn't. There were too many photographs. Blaze in the shelter yard. Blaze at the creek. Blaze wet. Blaze dry. Blaze pretending not to want food. Blaze obviously wanting food.

Katniss beside the van. Katniss on the roof. Katniss at the river. Katniss looking like she had personally invented travel. Ray. Laura. Michael. Evan. Temporary Home sign. The Volkswagen under rain. The Volkswagen beside roads. The Volkswagen at camp. I stopped. Too many. Marcus looked over.

"Problem?"

"Selection."

"Print all of them."

"No."

"That's what everyone says before printing all of them."

"I travel in an old Volkswagen."

He nodded.

"Storage."

"Exactly."

He returned to counter. I started choosing. Not the best photographs. That surprised me. The ones that meant something to someone else. Ray sitting near the van with the old sign. Laura laughing. Michael pretending not to smile. Evan beside Blaze. Tom under the rear of the Volkswagen, one hand pointing at something mechanical. Then the family photograph.

The one with everyone near the Temporary Home sign. I stopped on that. That one. Definitely. Then photographs for me. Blaze in the river. Katniss on the stump. Old road with the new highway behind it. Storm light over ocean. The covered bridge. The coastline. The heron lifting from the piling. Not all. Enough. Then I found a photograph I had almost forgotten.

Ray standing alone beside the Volkswagen. Not posed. He had been looking at the faded paint. Hand resting lightly against the side. I had taken it before the transfer. Before "Now it's his." Ray wasn't looking at camera. Good. Print. I ordered two copies. Marcus noticed.

"Duplicate?"

"One for him."

"Other?"

"Me."

He nodded. No commentary. Good. The printer began. Slowly. One image at a time. Paper became photographs. That felt different. Digital pictures were easy to make and easy to forget. Paper demanded somewhere to exist. A photograph came out of the machine. Blaze wet beside the Volkswagen. I smiled. Another. Katniss on the roof. Another. Ray. I picked it up carefully.

Nothing changed. Still just an image. But somehow more real. Marcus leaned against counter.

"Photographer?"

"Sometimes."

"Professional?"

"No."

"Good."

I looked at him.

"Why good?"

"Professionals complain more."

"About what?"

“Printing.”

Fair. He asked what I photographed.

“Mostly whatever makes me stop.”

“People?”

“Sometimes.”

“Landscapes?”

“Sometimes.”

“Animals?”

“Against my will.”

He looked out front window toward the Volkswagen. Blaze’s head visible. Katniss beside him.

“Those two?”

“Mostly.”

He smiled.

“You traveling with them?”

“Yes.”

“Long trip?”

“Maybe.”

“Destination?”

“South.”

He waited.

“Mostly.”

“Good enough.”

The printer finished. I sorted prints. One pile for Ray. One for Laura and family. One for me. Then I remembered something. Temporary Home sign. Back side. Names. Dates. Places.

Laura’s: **Next: ?** I selected one more photograph. The back of the sign. Printed it. Not because it was beautiful. Because it belonged with the others. Marcus offered envelopes. I bought three. Then stamps. Then a small padded mailer.

“This got expensive.”

“Memories usually do.”

I looked at him.

“That sounds rehearsed.”

“It is.”

Good. I sat at a small table by window. Ray’s envelope first.

I wrote: **Ray** Then stopped. No letter planned. I turned one print over. The photograph of Ray touching the Volkswagen.

On the back: **Still running. Still old. Still not a food truck.** That was enough.

Then another: **I said I'd send pictures.**

Then the wet Blaze photograph: **He has attempted to fight the Pacific. Results unclear.**

Katniss on roof: **She continues to interpret ownership broadly.** I included the family photograph. No writing. Didn't need it. Then I hesitated. Photograph of the van at camp. Faded exterior. Door open. Blaze nearby. Katniss on step. No name. No new paint. No attempt to become something else.

On the back: **It's being used.** That one mattered. I put everything in envelope. Laura's packet got family pictures. Evan got extra Blaze. Michael got the van mechanically alive. Tom got an engine-bay photograph with: **No new fires.** I almost wrote **yet**. Didn't. Growth. I mailed them from the shop. Not tomorrow. Not when I found a post office.

Now. The envelopes disappeared into a bin behind counter. That felt unexpectedly significant.

"Done," Marcus said.

I looked at the bin.

"Apparently."

Outside, Blaze greeted me as though I had been gone for a week. Katniss remained seated. I opened the door.

"Pictures."

Blaze sniffed the packet I kept.

"Not food."

Interest ended. Katniss smelled one corner.

"Also not food."

She remained interested. Cats were less practical. I put my prints into a thin folder. The empty shelf. No. I put them in the notebook pocket. Better. We walked around town before leaving. Blaze needed it. I did too. Katniss came. Harness. Leash. Sidewalk.

She had become good enough at this that people no longer seemed amazed by her until they actually noticed she was a cat. A woman passed. Looked at Blaze. Smiled. Then saw Katniss. Stopped.

"Is that a cat?"

"Today."

She looked confused. I kept walking. Sometimes improvement meant not explaining. The library sat at the end of main street. Old brick. Small. A bulletin board outside advertised: Community meeting. Book club. Historic photographs. I stopped. That last one was dangerous.

The sign said: **LOCAL ROADS & RIVER CROSSINGS PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE HISTORICAL COLLECTION UPSTAIRS MEETING ROOM** I looked at Blaze.

"No."

He had not suggested anything. Animals couldn't go inside. Cool weather. Van close. Safe. But we'd already done one indoor stop. I almost left. Then noticed hours. Exhibit open another three weeks. Good.

"Another day."

We walked on. That surprised me. Not every interesting thing had to happen immediately. Maybe I was learning something dangerous. At the edge of town, a small park followed the river. We stopped. Lunch. Blaze beneath table. Katniss on bench. Me with sandwich. Normal. I opened the photo folder. Looked through prints. Paper changed them. The storm-light photograph looked darker.

The covered bridge warmer. Blaze wetter. Katniss more judgmental. No improvement there. I stopped at Ray's photograph again. Hand on van. Looking down. A man letting go without walking away. I put it back. Some photographs became more honest later. We left town around one. South. The road crossed river twice. Then followed railroad tracks. Old warehouses appeared.

Then disappeared. A freight train passed opposite direction. Blaze stood. Long. Loud. Metal. He watched every car. Katniss slept through half of it. I looked at mirror.

"Different thresholds."

Blaze's tail moved. The phone buzzed. I ignored it until a turnout. Margaret. Message. **No meeting today. Promise.** I smiled.

Then: **Echo yelled at the vacuum cleaner for eleven minutes and won.**

I typed: **Expected outcome.** Sent. Another message came. A photograph. Echo standing on his perch. No drama. No question. I looked. Then closed phone. Good. We continued. No decision. No trial. No need to turn around. Exactly what I wanted. Probably. The road climbed away from railroad. Farmland returned. Clouds grew thicker. Not storm clouds. Soft layers. I saw an old wooden fence running toward a barn.

Didn't stop. Then a rusted tractor. Didn't stop. Then a tree growing through the remains of something metal beside field. Almost. Kept going. Photography improved when I stopped believing every interesting

thing deserved a photograph. Twenty minutes later, I stopped. No landmark. No historic sign. No animal. Just light. A field had been recently cut. Rows curved with land.

Dark clouds overhead. One opening in sky let sunlight reach only the farthest row. I parked safely. Camera. Blaze stayed inside. Katniss watched from side step. I walked a little. The lines in the field led toward the light. Too clean. Too obvious. I moved sideways. Now fence post cut across foreground. Bad. Moved again. Better. Waited. Light narrowed.

Almost gone. Click. Gone. I checked. Good. Keeper. One photograph. Enough. Back at the van, Katniss still sat on the side step. Correct surface. Good. I looked at her.

"You've learned geometry."

She blinked. Blaze shifted behind her.

"One of us has."

We continued. The road eventually reached another town. Smaller. One grocery. One fuel station. A church. A repair shop. A building that might once have been a bank. I needed fuel. At the pump, a man in work clothes walked around the Volkswagen. I knew what was coming.

"Original paint?"

"Mostly."

He nodded.

"Don't paint it."

"National committee?"

He looked confused.

"Never mind."

Then Blaze appeared.

"Big dog."

"Yes."

Katniss appeared. He looked at her.

"Cat?"

I waited.

"Apparently?"

I stared. He laughed.

"Guy at the feed store told me."

I looked at road.

"This is becoming a regional problem."

He laughed harder.

"You're the skeleton with the dog and cat."

I looked at myself.

“There are apparently not many of us.”

He introduced himself as Dale. He worked at the repair shop next door. He asked about the Volkswagen. I told him enough. Old. Recently back on road. Brakes done. Fuel lines replaced. Tires new. Electrical checked.

“Engine?”

“Still inside.”

“That’s a start.”

He asked if I wanted him to listen. I hesitated. Nothing sounded wrong. But old vehicles rewarded paranoia.

“Sure.”

I pulled near shop. Dale listened. Engine idling. Rear compartment. No opening anything dangerous while running. He nodded.

“Sounds like an old Volkswagen.”

“Technical.”

“Free.”

Ray’s influence spreading. He noticed the rear click when I mentioned it.

“Could be a dozen things.”

“Helpful.”

“Does it change with speed?”

“No.”

“Bumps?”

“Certain ones.”

“Probably body or cabinet.”

There it was. I looked at him.

“Don’t use that word.”

“What word?”

“Probably.”

He stepped back.

“Okay.”

Then:

“Most likely.”

Better. We checked obvious mounts once engine was off. Nothing urgent. One loose interior panel clip. Maybe. Dale tightened it.

“Try that.”

“What do I owe you?”

“Nothing.”

“No.”

“Buy something from grocery.”

“That’s not you.”

“My wife owns grocery.”

Of course. I bought groceries. Efficient economy. Blaze got nothing extra. Policy. Katniss got nothing. She didn’t care. I bought coffee. Because I lacked discipline in one specific area. When we left town, I hit three bumps. No click. I smiled. Fourth bump. Click.

“Still there.”

Blaze looked up.

“Good effort.”

We drove another hour. Late afternoon became gray. No rain. The road entered forest again. I started looking for camp. First campground closed. Seasonal maintenance. Fine. Second full. Unexpected. Third existed mostly as a sign pointing six miles down a road I wasn’t sure I wanted. I went anyway. Gravel. Again. The Volkswagen complained with every cabinet. Katniss moved lower.

Blaze stayed down. At mile four, I considered turning around. Then road improved. At mile six, campground appeared. Small. Public. Half empty. Good. No hookups. Fine. A creek ran behind sites. Trees dense. I chose one near end. Park. Level enough. Engine off. Silence. Blaze came out. Katniss followed. Routine. Water. Food. Walk. No bird. No trial. No rescue.

No hardware store. Good. The creek had a short trail. Leashed pets allowed. We walked before dinner. Blaze found a stick. Of course. He looked at me.

“One.”

He was not carrying one. Technical loophole. He picked it up. Fine. Katniss walked steadily. Then stopped. We stopped. She stared across creek. Nothing. Then I saw it. A small animal moving through brush. Too far. Gone quickly. Not important. Katniss remained focused.

“Leave it.”

Her ears moved. She did not move. Good enough. Blaze sniffed stick. We continued. Farther along, an old footbridge crossed creek. Not historic. Not scenic. Practical. Wooden rails. Wet boards. Katniss paused. Blaze crossed. I waited. Katniss stepped onto bridge. One paw. Then another. Water below. She crouched slightly. I did not pull. Waited. Blaze reached other side.

Turned. Sat. Interesting. Katniss watched him. Then walked. Slowly. Across. No drama. I smiled.

"Good."

She ignored me. Of course. On the return, she crossed without stopping. That mattered. No photograph. Good. Camp. Dinner. I opened the printed photograph folder again. Held Ray's image. Then put it back. I wondered when he'd get the envelope. Not important. It would arrive when it arrived. My phone buzzed. Ray. I stared. Coincidence. Probably. I answered.

"You're alive."

"Still."

"Van?"

"Still."

"Dog?"

"One stick."

"Cat?"

"Crossed a bridge."

Pause.

"That's an update."

"Important day."

Ray asked where we were.

"South."

He sighed. I gave him a town from earlier.

"Better."

I told him prints were coming.

"You mailed something?"

"Yes."

"You know phones exist."

"Unfortunately."

"Laura's going to make copies."

"Probably."

I froze. Ray laughed.

"You've ruined that word."

"Good."

He asked about the van. Running. Click still present. No other issues.

Then:

"Named it yet?"

"No."

"Good."

I waited.

"Still good?"

"Still."

"Why?"

Ray thought.

"Because when you know, you'll stop asking whether you know."

I stared at creek.

"That's irritating."

"Free."

Of course. We talked another few minutes. Nothing important. Which made it important.

Then Ray said:

"Laura says you better come back before the dog forgets us."

"Blaze remembers everyone who feeds him."

"Then we're safe."

Probably. I didn't say it. We hung up. Evening settled. I sat on the side step. Katniss took chair. Blaze lay with stick. I looked at my camera. One keeper today. Field. Light. Rows. Enough. Then the printed photos. More than enough. I thought about photographs leaving me. Envelopes traveling north while we continued south. Images moving opposite direction from the person who made them.

That was strange. Also good. A photograph didn't have to stay with the photographer. Maybe that was the point. I opened notebook. **Printed photos. Sent to Ray, Laura, family.**

Then: **Dale: rear click possibly interior/body. Tightened panel clip. Click remains.** I paused.

Then: **Katniss crossed footbridge on her own.** That felt worth recording.

Then: **One keeper. Cut field / last light.** I closed notebook. The empty shelf remained empty. The carrier space remained empty. The prints were gone north. Nothing felt missing. That was becoming easier. Katniss jumped inside. Blaze followed. Stick first. I looked at him.

"One."

Tail. Good. Before sleeping, I checked phone. One new message. Margaret. Just text. **Echo learned to open the cabinet where I keep paper towels.** I smiled.

Typed: **That sounds like your problem.** Sent. Three dots appeared.

Then: **For now.** I stared at that. Did not answer. Put phone down. Blaze settled. Katniss found the warmest place. Outside, creek moved through darkness. No whistles. No decisions. No questions requiring answers tonight. Just proof we'd passed through places. And proof some of them had passed through us.

CHAPTER 38

The Shape of What Was Left Behind

The creek was louder in morning. Not because it had changed. Because everything else had gone quiet. Blaze slept until coffee. Katniss did not. She sat in the open doorway. Watching trees. Watching creek. Watching nothing I could identify.

“Useful?” Blink.

“Good.”

Coffee. Breakfast. Water. Blaze carried yesterday’s stick outside. One. Still. I looked at it.

“You’re committed.” Tail.

The campground emptied slowly. A family two sites over packed bicycles. A couple with a trailer argued gently about leveling blocks. Someone started a generator. Then stopped it. Good. I checked map. South remained available. So did east. West was mostly water. North was where we’d been. Easy decision. Then I remembered the library. Not immediately. That would have been suspicious.

It happened while I was putting the camera into its bag. Historic photographs. Roads. River crossings. I stopped. Katniss looked over.

“No.”

She hadn’t said anything. I zipped the bag. Then unzipped it.

“Fine.”

We left campground. Back toward yesterday’s town. This technically meant north. Blaze stood at first turn.

“I know.”

Katniss took passenger seat.

“Temporary reversal.”

No objections. The town looked different in morning. Less busy. The print shop wasn't open yet. The diner was. Library was. I parked beneath trees. Cool day. No sun on van. Short stop. Safe. Blaze looked at library. Then me.

"No."

Katniss looked at library.

"Also no."

They stayed secured. I took camera. Notebook. Nothing else. Inside, the library smelled like old paper and radiator heat. Good smell. The woman at front desk looked up. Gray hair. Round glasses. A sweater with small birds on it. Not lorikeets. I checked.

"Morning."

"Morning."

I pointed upstairs. "Historic photographs?"

"Meeting room."

"Open?"

"Until four."

"Animals?"

She looked toward window. Saw Blaze. Then Katniss.

"Not unless they're service animals."

"They are not."

"Good."

I nodded. She smiled.

"Most people argue."

"I've met my animals."

That seemed sufficient. Upstairs was smaller than expected. Maybe thirty photographs. Some copies. Some originals behind glass. Maps. Two handwritten ledgers. A few typed labels. Nothing dramatic. Good. The first wall showed the town. Main street. Flood years. Old depot. Bridge construction. Storefronts that no longer existed.

People in front of buildings. People beside wagons. People holding things nobody held anymore. I moved slowly. One photograph showed six men beside a wagon. The wagon was centered. Men were not. Interesting. Another showed a ferry crossing. People tiny. River large. Road visible on both banks. I stopped. Not because of the people. Because of the road.

It entered from lower left. Crossed through image. Disappeared behind trees on opposite bank. The photographer had not stood where most people would have stood. I moved closer. No attribution. Only:

River ferry crossing, c. 1891. Photographer unknown. I stared. Road first. People second. Something tugged. Mercer. I stood there longer than I meant to.

Somewhere between Blaze, Katniss, Ray, the Volkswagen, storms, wrong turns, one very loud bird, and learning that cats could occupy any surface except the one geometry permitted, I had let that question drift farther behind me than I realized. Not forgotten. Just crowded out. That was different. I pulled notebook. Old notes.

E. Mercer. River crossing. Olympic Peninsula. 1890. Do not assume E. Mercer was male. Routes? Crossings? Documentation before change? Then my newer note from the wrong turn bookstore: Do not make every old photograph Mercer. I read that twice.

"Still good advice."

A man behind me said: "Talking to yourself?" I turned. Older. Thin. Brown jacket. White mustache.

"Mostly."

He nodded. "Best audience sometimes." He carried a stack of folders. Volunteer. Probably. He looked at photograph.

"That one's popular."

"Why?"

"Nobody knows where it was taken."

"That helps?"

"People like mysteries."

Unfortunately. He introduced himself as Howard. Retired surveyor. Volunteer with local historical group. I pointed to the image. "Do you know anything beyond label?" He looked.

"Not much."

"Original?"

"Copy."

"From?"

"Collection donated in the seventies."

"By who?"

Howard thought.

"Family named Bell, I think."

He set folders on table.

"Let me check."

This is how trouble begins. I followed. Howard opened one folder. Then another. Paper. Typed inventory sheets. Old index cards. Pencil. No database. Excellent. He found Bell collection.

“Here.”

Donor: Marjorie Bell, 1974. Contents: family papers. local maps. photographic prints. miscellaneous negatives. No photographer.

“Anything on back of original?”

Howard looked at me.

“You really are interested.”

“Apparently.”

He smiled.

“We can check.”

I almost said no. Didn’t. He disappeared. I looked around. Another photograph nearby. Old road cut through timber. Two men standing beside fallen tree. Men small. Road dominant. Same instinct. Maybe. I checked label. County road improvement, c. 1892. Photographer unknown. Again.

I wrote: Similar composition. Could mean same photographer. Could mean common survey/documentation style. Do not decide yet. Good. Howard returned carrying a flat archival box. Gloves. Pencil only. No food. No coffee. Cruel place. He opened box. Inside were mounted photographs. Some warped. Some faded. He found ferry image. The original was darker. Edges damaged. He turned mount carefully.

Back had pencil. Faint. Not much. A date. Maybe 1891. A location word partly erased. Then initials. I leaned closer. Not E.M. Looked like: R.B. Maybe. I exhaled. Howard noticed. “Expecting something else?”

“Maybe.”

“What?”

I hesitated. Then told him. Not everything. Enough. Old photograph. Olympic Peninsula. E. Mercer. Several images. Roads. Crossings. Place over people. Howard listened. Actually listened.

“Could be survey work.”

“I thought that.”

“Could be newspapers.”

“Thought that too.”

“Could be somebody who liked roads.”

“That would be inconvenient.”

He smiled.

“Initials can lie.”

“What?”

“Catalog notes.”

He tapped mount.

“R.B. might be donor note. Owner. Printer. Person pictured. Nobody knows unless someone wrote enough.”

Good. More uncertainty. Exactly what I needed. Howard pulled another photograph. Old bridge. Half completed. People posed in foreground. Bridge centered.

“Now this one,” he said, “definitely local.”

I looked. Different. Photographer cared about people. Faces. Crew. Pride. Not Mercer. Interesting. Then another. Road disappearing into forest. No people. Howard put it down. I stopped breathing. Not literally. Skeleton. Still. The image was not identical to Mercer. Not even close. But it had the same kind of decision.

Road entered lower center. Turned. Disappeared behind heavy trees. No obvious subject except route itself. I checked back before asking. No initials. Front label: Old wagon road east of river, date uncertain. Howard looked at me.

“That one?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe what?”

“Same kind of eye.”

He looked at photograph.

“Meaning?”

I pointed.

“Most people would photograph the wagon.”

“There isn’t one.”

“Exactly.”

Howard smiled.

“You’re going to make me work.”

“Sorry.”

“No, you’re not.”

Correct. We compared mounts. Paper. Dimensions. Edges. Image tone. I knew enough to know I did not know enough. Howard knew more.

“Not same batch,” he said.

“Why?”

“Paper.”

He showed me. Different surface. Different mount thickness.

“Could still be same photographer, printed later.”

“Could.”

“Could be nobody connected.”

“Could.”

He looked at me.

“You don’t like could.”

“I have a difficult relationship with probably.”

He nodded like that made sense. We kept going. Then a small envelope inside box. Not photographs. Negatives. Old. Howard did not open it.

“Those haven’t been scanned.”

“Why?”

“Time.”

“Funding?”

“Also time.”

I looked at envelope. Writing on front: Bell family misc. negatives. Roads / river / timber. No name. That was enough to irritate me.

“Can those be viewed?”

“Eventually.”

“When?”

Howard laughed. Historical preservation operated on geological time. Fair. I wrote envelope information. Then stopped.

“This isn’t Mercer.”

Howard looked at me.

“You sound disappointed.”

“I’m trying not to be.”

“Why?”

“Because if I want it to be Mercer, everything starts looking like Mercer.”

Howard smiled.

“That’s a problem historians have.”

“I’m not a historian.”

“Worse.”

I looked at him.

“Interested person.”

“Exactly.”

Fair. I took no photographs of originals. Not without permission. Howard said I could photograph display copies. So I did. Reference only. Ferry crossing. Wagon road. County road. Not keepers. Evidence.

Different category. I wrote that too. Reference images are not proof. Good. Howard wandered to a wall map.

“This road here used to connect to river landing.”

I followed. Old county map. Routes drawn differently from modern road. Some ended at crossings. Some vanished entirely.

“Flood changed channel,” Howard said.

“When?”

“Several times.”

“Helpful.”

“History is rude.”

I liked him. He pointed to one abandoned alignment.

“That road doesn’t exist now.”

“At all?”

“Pieces.”

“Can you reach them?”

“Some.”

“Public?”

“Some.”

There was that word again. He marked a spot on a photocopied modern map.

“Old grade crosses near a county access road. Nothing spectacular.”

Excellent.

“Good.”

He looked at me.

“Most people want spectacular.”

“Most people are wrong.”

Maybe. I stayed another hour. No Mercer name appeared. That mattered. Not because thread failed. Because it became less convenient. Before leaving, Howard said: “If you find more of those Mercer photographs, bring copies.”

“Why?”

“I’d like to see whether they really do share an eye.”

That phrase stayed. Share an eye. Interesting. I went downstairs. The woman at desk looked up.

“Find what you wanted?”

“No.”

She smiled.

“Successful visit.”

Apparently. Outside, Blaze was awake. Katniss sat passenger side. Correct. I opened door.

“History.”

Blaze sniffed notebook.

“Still not food.”

Katniss stepped onto side step. I showed her photocopy map.

“Road.” Blink.

“Exactly.”

We walked before driving. Short. Blaze stretched. Katniss investigated hedge. I thought about Mercer. Not the person. The absence. That was what bothered me. A name existed. Photographs existed. A collection existed. Postcard existed. But the person barely did.

No face. No biography. No certainty of gender. No home. No clear reason for taking pictures. Just choices in frames. Maybe that was why I had cared in first place. People leave things. Most things say less than we want. We returned to van. Phone buzzed. Margaret. I considered not looking. Looked. Echo is offended that I moved his water dish six inches.

I typed: Reasonable. Then erased. Typed: Give him my support. Sent. No further question. No trial schedule. Good. South again. For real this time. I followed Howard’s map first. Not because I was chasing Mercer. Because the old road was nearby. Important distinction. Probably. County road narrowed. Pavement. Then gravel shoulder. Then trees. I found access point. Public sign. Good.

Parked. Blaze out on leash. Katniss harnessed. Camera. Staff. Notebook. Short walk. Old grade appeared slowly. Not as road. As shape. Raised earth. Different vegetation. Straightness where forest preferred curves. I stopped.

“Road.”

Blaze sniffed. Katniss stepped onto old grade. She walked center. Of course. We followed. Not far. Trees had reclaimed most of it. Roots crossed. Ferns filled ditches. But once seen, road remained visible. That was strange. Human intention persisted after use stopped.

A shallow cut through hillside. A line of old drainage stones. One rotting timber near creek. Nothing spectacular. Howard was right. Perfect. I took camera. First composition: road centered. Too documentary. Second: old grade entering lower left, disappearing behind trees. Too familiar. Mercer. I lowered camera. No. Blaze looked at me.

“Not everything.”

I moved. Found angle with trees taking most frame. Road barely visible. Only enough to suggest direction. Better. Waited. Cloud shifted. Soft light. Click. I checked. Good. Not Mercer. Mine. That felt important. We walked another quarter mile.

Creek crossing. No bridge. Old abutment stones remained. Maybe. Could have been something else. I did not decide. Katniss stopped at water. Blaze drank. I photographed stones. Reference. Not keeper. Then looked upstream. A fallen tree crossed creek. Light caught water beneath it. Click. Better photograph. Nothing historical. Good. We returned. Back at van I opened notebook. Historic exhibit. No confirmed Mercer.

Then: Ferry crossing c. 1891. Unknown photographer. Composition similar. Back initials possibly R.B. Not evidence. Then: Old wagon road image. Similar visual habit. Different paper/mount. Could be unrelated. Then: Bell collection has unscanned negatives labeled roads / river / timber. I stopped. Then wrote: I got sidetracked. Looked at sentence. Too simple. Added: Not from lack of interest. Life got louder.

Better. Then: Mercer still matters. I almost crossed it out. Didn't. Underneath: Do not make every old photograph Mercer. Still necessary. Then: Do not stop looking because everything cannot be Mercer. Better. I closed notebook. Blaze climbed in. Stick first. Katniss took passenger seat. I sat behind wheel. The van remained unnamed. Good. Engine started. Rear click. Still.

"Reliable."

Blaze lay down. We drove south. An hour later, road opened into wide valley. Clouds high. Light flat. Nothing asked me to stop. So I didn't. That was becoming a skill. Late afternoon, I found a roadside pullout above river. Not same river. Probably. I laughed.

"Sorry."

Katniss looked at me.

"Word problem."

We stopped anyway. Not for history. For water. For Blaze. For me. The river below curved away behind cottonwoods. A road on far side followed it briefly before disappearing. I looked. Then looked again. Camera stayed in bag. Some compositions existed without needing proof. I sat on guardrail. Blaze beside me. Katniss on ground. Mercer.

Whoever E. Mercer had been, they had stood somewhere. Looked somewhere. Chosen where frame ended. That was all I actually knew. Maybe that was enough for now. Phone buzzed. Ray. I ignored it for thirty seconds. Then answered.

"You're alive."

"Still."

"Van?"

"Still."

"Dog?"

"One stick."

"Cat?"

"Still a cat."

"Bird?"

I paused.

"Elsewhere."

"Good?"

"Currently."

Ray accepted that.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for a dead photographer."

Silence. Then: "Normal day."

"Apparently."

I told him a little about Mercer. Not whole thing. Old photographs. Unknown person. Roads. Crossings. Possibly chasing nothing. Ray listened. Then said: "You like finding out where things came from." I looked at van.

"Maybe."

"That's not a maybe."

Annoying. I changed subject. He let me. When we hung up, sun had dropped lower. The river turned brighter. Road across water disappeared into trees. I reached for camera. Stopped. No. Memory. Enough. We camped twelve miles farther south. Small site. No creek this time. No river. Just pine needles and evening wind. Blaze took stick. Katniss took chair.

Routine. Dinner. After dark, I opened notebook once more. Read old Mercer notes from beginning. River crossing. E. Mercer. Postcard. Collection. Routes. Crossings. Documentation before change. Then today's notes. Nothing solved. Good. Mysteries solved too quickly became trivia.

I wrote one final line: Maybe Mercer was not photographing places. Maybe Mercer was photographing how to get through them. I looked at it. Possible. Dangerous. Interesting. I underlined nothing. Closed notebook. Outside, wind moved through trees. Blaze slept. Katniss cleaned one paw. Somewhere else, Echo was probably objecting to furniture

placement. Here, there was only road. Old roads. New roads. Roads no longer visible.

And one photographer who had been dead long enough to become mostly choices. That was enough to keep looking.

CHAPTER 39

What the Road Keeps

Morning came without urgency. Good. The trees moved first. Wind high in the branches. Then lower. Then through camp. Blaze lifted his head. Katniss did not. Coffee. Water. Breakfast. The stick had survived another night. One. Still. I looked at Blaze. “Remarkable durability.” Tail. Katniss stretched across the chair like she had paid for it. I checked the road. South. Again.

No library. No historical society. No rescue appointment. No surprise bird logistics. Excellent. I packed. The notebook went into its usual place. Mercer notes inside. Quiet again. Not gone. That felt better. We left just after seven. The road stayed narrow for twenty miles. Trees close. Shoulders uneven. Occasional mailbox. Occasional house. Then nothing. The van rattled. Rear click. Still.

“Persistent.” Blaze slept. Katniss watched.

I tried listening for pattern. Bump. Click. Turn. No click. Another bump. Click. Cabinet? Panel? Door? Something old reminding me it was old. Fair. The road opened into farmland. Low fields. Fences. Clouds breaking. A hawk sat on a fence post. I almost stopped. Didn’t. Progress. Ten minutes later I stopped for something worse. An abandoned gas station.

Not abandoned dramatically. No collapsed roof. No vines swallowing pumps. Just closed. Two old pumps stood under a faded canopy. Windows dusty. Sign blank. Paint worn down to weather. I parked across the road. Safe pullout. Camera. Blaze raised his head. “No.” He lay back down. Katniss moved to side step. I crossed carefully. First frame. Too much nostalgia.

Second. Too centered. Third from lower angle, pumps in foreground, road continuing behind. Better. Then a truck passed. White blur. Click. I checked. That one. Old place. Current road. Movement through. Keeper. Back at van, Katniss had moved to passenger seat.

“Management.” Blink.

We continued. A town appeared around nine. Smaller than yesterday's. One block of brick storefronts. A feed store. Cafe. Hardware store. I kept driving past hardware store. No emotional reaction. Growth. The cafe won. Parking beside shade. Animals secure. Cool enough. Short stop.

Inside, four people. One waitress. One man reading newspaper. Two women talking quietly over coffee. I sat at counter.

"Coffee?" the waitress asked.

"Yes."

"Food?"

"Eventually."

She poured.

"Passing through?"

"Apparently."

She looked at me. Then out window. Then back.

"Dog yours?"

"Yes."

"Cat too?"

"She travels with us."

There it was. Still good. The waitress nodded like this was a complete explanation. Excellent town. Her name was Teresa. I ordered eggs. Toast. Potatoes. Nothing complicated. The man with newspaper folded one page. Looked over.

"Old VW yours?"

"Yes."

"What year?"

"Old enough."

He laughed.

"That means you don't know."

"That means I don't want to be corrected."

He accepted that. His name was Carl. Not the laundromat Carl. Another recycled name. He had owned two Volkswagens. Both gone. One rust. One divorce.

"Which was worse?" I asked.

He looked at coffee.

"Rust was cheaper."

Fair. He asked where I was headed.

"South."

"Where south?"

"Eventually."

Teresa put plate down. "That's not a place."

"Exactly."

Good eggs. Carl asked if I camped in van.

"Yes."

"With dog and cat?"

"Yes."

He looked through window. Blaze asleep. Katniss visible.

"Seems crowded."

"Sometimes."

I thought of empty carrier space. Did not say it. Teresa refilled coffee. A bulletin board near register held local notices. For sale. Lost keys. Church supper. Firewood. Estate sale. Photography club. I looked twice. No old photographs. Good. I finished breakfast. Paid.

Teresa handed receipt. Then said: "There's a river overlook about twelve miles south. Nice if clouds stay broken." I looked outside.

"They won't."

She nodded.

"Probably not."

I stared. She stared back.

"What?"

"Nothing."

I left. The overlook was fourteen miles south. Not twelve. I considered being offended. Then saw it. River below. Wide. Brown-green. Fields beyond. Clouds opening just enough. I stopped. Blaze came out on leash. Katniss stayed inside. Her choice. The view was good. Too good. I took camera. The obvious picture was broad valley. I took it anyway. Reference.

Then waited. A tractor moved through far field. Too small. Cloud shadow crossed river. Better. Then sunlight struck one bend. Click. Good. Not great. I moved fifty feet. A weathered guardrail entered foreground. Ugly. Useful. Road. River. Field. Cloud. Click. Better. Keeper. Blaze sniffed guardrail.

"Your review?" Tail.

Good enough. We drove. Around noon the phone buzzed. I waited until next pullout. Priya. Not Margaret. Interesting. I opened message. Echo has had two normal days after the drive. Eating, vocalizing, sleeping normally. No concerning stress behavior reported.

Then: If you are still willing, we could discuss one longer trial later this week. No pressure. I stared at screen. Blaze looked at me.

"Administrative."

Katniss stretched. I typed: Still willing. Not today. Priya replied: Agreed. Not today. Good. I put phone away. No flutter. No dramatic realization. Just information. That seemed healthy. We continued. Afternoon road flattened. More open country. Fewer trees. Long fences. Color became difficult. Fields were some shade. Sky another. Van another. I could name none confidently.

"Brown enough." Katniss looked at me.

"Professional assessment."

Blaze did not care. A roadside fruit stand appeared. Open. I stopped. Apples. Pears. Peaches. Jars. Honey. The woman running it wore a broad hat and had hands that looked used to work.

"Try one." She held out peach slice.

I did. Good.

"That's dangerous."

"For you or me?"

"Storage."

She laughed. I bought six. Then three pears. Then honey. Too much. She looked at van.

"Traveling?"

"Yes."

"Long?"

"Apparently."

"With them?"

She pointed. Blaze. Katniss.

"Yes."

"Any kids?"

"No."

"Smart."

I laughed. She gave me two extra peaches.

"This seems like punishment."

"Hospitality."

Worse. Back in van I rearranged food. The empty shelf tempted me. No. I put fruit in crate. Katniss watched.

"Not yours."

She sniffed peach.

“Definitely not yours.”

We left. Half an hour later, one peach rolled out. Across floor. Under bench. Blaze followed it with eyes.

“No.”

He looked at me.

“Fruit is not ball.”

Tail. I stopped safely. Retrieved peach. Bruised. Of course. I ate it. Problem solved. The road climbed again. Trees returned gradually. I noticed before sign. Air cooler. Shadows longer. At a bend, an old cemetery sat above road. Small. Fenced. I almost drove past. Then stopped. Not for death. For view. Public access. Gate open. I walked alone. Animals stayed secure. Cool enough.

Maybe fifty stones. Some new. Some old. I kept distance. No photographing names without reason. At far edge, valley opened below. Road visible in pieces through trees. I raised camera. Then lowered. Too much. Not because photograph was bad. Because it wasn’t mine. I walked back.

At gate stood a stone with no readable name. Weather had erased most lettering. I looked. Nothing left but shape. I did not photograph that either. Back in van: “Sometimes camera stays in bag.” Katniss blinked. Good. Later, a rain shower caught us. Brief. Hard. Wipers struggled at first. Then remembered job. Blaze watched water crawl across windows. Katniss moved away from glass.

The van smelled like damp dog before Blaze was damp. A remarkable skill. Rain ended. Road shone. Sun came back. Steam rose in patches. I pulled over. This time immediately. Camera. Road surface reflecting sky. Dark trees. Thin vapor. A truck approached from distance. I waited. Too fast. It passed. Spray. Click. Bad. Another car. Better timing. Click.

Still wrong. No third vehicle. I stood five minutes. Nothing.

“Fine.”

I photographed empty road. That was best one. Of course. Keeper. By late afternoon I started looking for camp. First place private RV park. Too crowded. Second too exposed. Third was county campground beside small reservoir. Good. Pets allowed. Leash rules. Sites spaced. I chose one near trees. Blaze out. Katniss out. Routine. Water. Food. Walk. The reservoir had a path along edge. Wide. Easy.

We walked slowly. Blaze carried stick. One. Still. Katniss moved well. A family passed with two children. One child pointed.

“Skeleton!”

“Yes.”

Then: “Big dog!”

“Also yes.”

Then: “Cat!” I looked at Katniss.

“Apparently.”

The child’s mother laughed. Regional problem worsening. We kept walking. At far end of reservoir, old concrete structure stood partly in water. Maybe pump house. Maybe intake. I photographed once. Reference. Then noticed reflection. Wind dropped briefly. Concrete shape doubled. Click. Good. Then wind returned. Gone. Keeper. Three today. Enough. Back at camp, phone buzzed again. Margaret. I waited.

Opened. Photograph of Echo. He had shredded paper towel into an impressive white pile. Message: He found the cabinet again. I smiled. Typed: Security failure. She replied: He opened it from the top this time. I looked at van cabinets. No. Absolutely not. I typed: This information does not improve his application. Three dots. He disagrees. Of course.

I put phone down. Blaze ate. Katniss ate. I made dinner. Peaches survived. Two. Maybe three. Hard to tell after bruising. After dark, I opened notebook. Today’s photographs: Closed gas station / road behind / passing truck. Keeper. River overlook / guardrail / bend light. Keeper. Wet road after rain / empty frame. Keeper. Reservoir concrete reflection. Keeper. Four. I had forgotten one.

Too many? No. Different reasons. Then: Priya: Echo normal two days post-drive. Possible longer trial later this week. I stared at that. Wrote: Still willing. Not today. Good. Then Mercer. No new evidence. I almost skipped it. Then wrote: Mercer still quiet. That’s okay. That felt strange. But right. A mystery didn’t disappear because nothing happened for a day.

Neither did a bird. Neither did a road behind you. I closed notebook. Night settled over reservoir. No traffic. No rain. No whistle. Blaze lay outside near chair. Stick between paws. Katniss climbed onto side step. Then roof. Correct. I looked at van. Faded paint. Rust. No name. Still.

I thought about Ray’s line. When you know, you’ll stop asking whether you know. Annoying. True maybe. I said nothing. Wind moved across reservoir. Water changed shape. Then settled. Some things stayed because you carried them. Some because they followed. Some because you hadn’t finished with them yet. Mercer. Echo. Ray. The van. The road. None needed solving tonight.

That was enough.

CHAPTER 40

Longer Than Ten Minutes

The next morning began with a peach. Not metaphorically. It rolled off the counter. Across the floor. Under the bench. Blaze watched.

“No.” Tail.

Katniss watched too.

“Also no.”

I retrieved peach. Bruised. Still edible. Breakfast. Coffee. Water. Peach. The reservoir was flat. No wind. Yesterday’s concrete reflection would have been easier now. Too easy. I left camera in bag. Blaze carried his stick outside. One. Still. Katniss sat on the side step. Correct. Everything behaved. Suspicious. I checked phone. Nothing. Good. Then nothing again. Better. We left around eight. South.

The road followed low hills through farms and small patches of timber. No urgency. No destination. For nearly an hour, nothing happened. Excellent. Then the rear click stopped. I noticed because I had been waiting for it. Bump. Nothing. Another bump. Nothing. I slowed.

“That’s concerning.” Blaze lifted his head.

“Things aren’t supposed to fix themselves.”

Katniss looked out window. Another bump. No click. I pulled into a gravel turnout. Engine off. I checked cabinet. Panel. Rear door. Latch. Nothing obvious. Then I found it. A spoon. Not dramatic. Not mechanical. Not structural. A metal spoon had worked itself behind the cabinet trim. Every certain bump, it had tapped the panel. I stared. Months of civilization had led to this.

“Technical diagnosis.” Blaze sniffed spoon.

“No.”

I put it away. We drove. Bump. Silence. Good. I called Ray at next stop. He answered: “You’re alive.”

“Mechanical breakthrough.”

“Van?”

“Spoon.”

Silence. Then: “I need more.” I explained. Ray laughed for too long.

“Tom’s going to enjoy that.”

“Tom doesn’t need to know.”

“He absolutely does.”

“You’re becoming unreliable.”

“You keep calling me.”

Fair. Before hanging up Ray asked: “Named it yet?”

“No.”

“Good.”

Still. We continued. At eleven, Priya texted. Echo has continued doing well. Margaret says normal appetite, sleep, vocalizing, and destructive ambition. Then: If you’re willing, we’d like to try a longer drive tomorrow. About thirty minutes each way with a quiet stop. Same safety setup. Tomorrow. I looked at road. Then at empty carrier space. Katniss was sitting in it. Of course.

I typed: Yes. Stopped. Deleted. Typed: Still willing. Thirty minutes is fine. Priya replied: Good. Same park, 10 a.m. Margaret will bring Echo. No celebration. No meaning. I put phone down. Katniss remained in carrier space.

“Eviction notice tomorrow.” Blink.

Blaze yawned. We drove another two hours. A small town appeared around lunch. No historical exhibit. No bird rescue. No mechanic. Good. I bought food. Walked Blaze. Walked Katniss. Sat beside a courthouse lawn long enough to watch clouds move. A man feeding pigeons asked if Katniss bothered them.

“She would like to.”

He nodded.

“Honest cat.”

“Very.”

We kept distance. No photographs. That evening we camped north of the meeting place. Close enough that tomorrow did not require planning. Far enough that it still felt like travel. I prepared the van. Carrier anchor. Barrier. Harness points. Temperature monitor. Water. Towels. Cleaning supplies. Then I stopped and removed half of what I had put out. Too much preparation could become performance.

Blaze watched.

“Don’t.” Tail.

Katniss occupied carrier space again. I moved her. She returned.

“Tomorrow.”

She stayed. Fine. Night quiet. I slept well. That surprised me. Morning arrived. Coffee. Food. Water. Blaze knew something was different. Not because of Echo. Because I was organized. He watched me suspiciously.

"Accurate."

We reached park at nine forty-seven. Margaret arrived at nine fifty-two. Priya at nine fifty-eight. Nobody commented on timing. Good people. Echo announced himself from carrier before Margaret opened SUV. Three notes. Margaret answered. Then Echo did my bad whistle. I looked away. Priya heard.

"Still reinforced."

"Apparently."

We started with the same routine. Carrier placement. Anchor points. Temperature. Ventilation. Blaze restrained. Katniss physically separated. No direct access. Margaret sat passenger seat again. Katniss stared. Margaret looked back. "Still sorry." Katniss did not care. Echo entered van inside carrier. He looked around. Not frozen. Not frantic. Interested. Different. I noticed. Did not interpret. Priya stood beside open door.

"Plan."

"Thirty minutes south."

"Quiet road."

"One stop."

"Twenty minutes parked."

"Return."

"Stop immediately if distress."

She nodded.

"Good."

There was that word. I closed door. Engine started. Echo shifted once. Then stayed upright. Blaze lay down immediately. Katniss watched carrier. I said: "Window." She looked outside. Still maybe coincidence. We rolled through parking lot. One slow loop. Echo whistled. Not mine. Three notes. Margaret answered. Then silence. At exit, I stopped. Margaret looked at me.

"Still okay?"

"Yes."

We turned south. First five minutes were almost boring. Good. Echo watched movement through carrier. Trees. Light. Passing cars. No eating yet. No preening. Just alert. Blaze watched road. Katniss watched everything. At six minutes, a delivery truck passed. Echo leaned away. No wing flare. Recovered immediately. Margaret saw it.

"Better than motorcycle."

"Different sound."

"Still."

I nodded. Ten minutes. Echo moved to other side of perch. Twelve. He chewed something he was allowed to chew. Priya's car followed at steady distance. Fifteen. Echo ate. Margaret didn't say anything. Good. I noticed anyway. Seventeen. Road left river and moved through open fields. Wind pushed van slightly. Echo shifted stance. Then settled. Twenty. Blaze snored.

Margaret looked at him.

"Professional."

"Highest level."

Twenty-two. Katniss curled down. That mattered. Twenty-five. Echo whistled my bad whistle. I ignored it. Again. Ignored. Third. I answered. Margaret smiled.

"Strong boundaries."

"Developing."

Twenty-nine. A sign appeared for county day-use area. Our stop. I turned in. Thirty-one minutes. Close enough. Engine off. Echo climbed higher. Not relief. Maybe curiosity. No interpretation. Priya parked behind. We waited before opening doors. One minute. Two. Echo preened. Priya came over. Looked through window first. Then opened passenger-side door carefully.

"How was he?"

Margaret answered: "Alert. Ate at fifteen. One mild reaction to truck. Recovered." Priya looked at me.

"Anything else?"

"Bad whistle remains."

"Not clinically concerning."

"Debatable."

She checked Echo. Breathing normal. Posture good. Feet good. Eyes bright. Then Blaze. Calm. Then Katniss. Calm enough.

"Management still working." Priya said.

"Trust?"

"No."

Good. The day-use area had picnic tables. A trail to water. Lots of open space. Echo stayed in carrier at first. Margaret sat beside him. Blaze came out on leash. Katniss remained separated inside. I walked Blaze

around parking area. When we returned, Echo was eating again. Priya looked pleased without looking pleased. Professional talent.

After ten minutes, Katniss came into her harnessed section at opposite side of van. Physical barrier still between. She saw Echo. Echo saw her. Katniss sat. No crouch. No stalking posture. No tail twitch. Still a cat. Still a bird. Still management. Priya said: "Good." I didn't object this time. Progress. We stayed twenty-three minutes. No reason to rush.

Echo made normal sounds. Blaze drank. Katniss eventually looked away. Margaret stared at water.

"You okay?" I asked.

She nodded. Then: "This is easier today."

"For him?"

"For me."

I waited. She looked at Echo.

"Last time I kept thinking about Diane."

"And today?"

"Still thinking about Diane."

"Difference?"

Margaret watched water.

"I'm also thinking about Echo."

That was enough. I didn't improve it. We loaded again. Same setup. Same checks. Return trip. Echo settled faster than first leg. At seven minutes he ate. At nine he began making quiet sounds. Not whistles. Just bird noise. Margaret laughed.

"He does that when he's comfortable."

"You're interpreting."

"So are you."

"No."

"You've been interpreting this entire trip while pretending not to."

I looked at road.

"Unsafe conversation while driving."

She smiled. Blaze snored again. Katniss slept. Twenty minutes. Echo preened. Twenty-five. A bus approached opposite direction. Margaret noticed before I did.

"Oh."

Diane's story. He hated buses. The bus passed. Large. Loud. Air pressure. Echo froze. Wings close. Body low. No panic. I slowed a little. Margaret stayed quiet. Echo remained still. Five seconds. Ten. Then lifted.

Looked around. Whistled. My bad whistle. I laughed. Could not help it. Margaret laughed too.

"Apparently buses have improved."

"Or standards declined."

Echo ate again two minutes later. Good. Thirty-one minutes. Park. Engine off. Priya approached. She did not ask immediately. Watched Echo. Then: "How did he handle the bus?" Margaret told her. Priya nodded.

"Recovery matters."

Not absence of reaction. Recovery. I liked that. She checked him again. Everything normal. Then she said: "That was a good trial." I waited. She looked at me.

"Yes. Good."

I let it go. Margaret stood beside carrier.

"What next?"

Priya answered slowly.

"Not a decision today."

Excellent.

"We let him recover. See how he behaves tonight and tomorrow. If he's normal, then we have useful information."

"Useful for travel?" I asked.

"Useful for deciding whether travel is a reasonable placement option."

Placement. There it was. Not adoption. Not family. Placement. Good word. Priya continued.

"If we move forward, next step probably isn't longer driving."

I looked at her.

"What is it?"

"An overnight."

I didn't answer immediately. Margaret didn't either. Priya clarified.

"Parked. Controlled. One night. Close enough that Margaret can take Echo home immediately if needed."

I looked at van. Carrier space. Anchor. Barrier. Blaze. Katniss. An overnight. That was different. Not because of distance. Because of morning. Travel wasn't just movement. It was sleeping somewhere. Waking somewhere. Routine after dark. Routine before coffee. I looked at Priya.

"Not tomorrow."

"No."

"Good."

Margaret smiled.

“Strong boundaries.”

“Developing.”

Echo whistled. Of course. We unloaded him. Margaret let him settle on secure perch. He looked toward van again. I saw it. Did not refuse it this time. Interested. That was all. Blaze lay in grass. Katniss came out only after Echo was safely farther away. She walked around van. Sniffed tires. Then sat under passenger door. No drama.

Priya left after paperwork. Margaret stayed. We had lunch at picnic table. Echo secure beside her. Blaze under mine. Katniss in shade. Margaret opened sandwich.

“Do you want him?”

I looked at her. That question had not been asked before. Not directly. I took time.

“I don’t know.”

She nodded.

“Good.”

I looked at her.

“You too?”

“I don’t know either.”

Good. We ate. After a minute I said: “I want him to end up where he’s good.”

“So do I.”

“That might be with us.”

“Yes.”

“Might not.”

“Yes.”

Echo shredded a piece of permitted paper. Neither of us looked at him. Margaret said: “Diane would have known.”

“Maybe.”

She looked at me.

“You don’t think so?”

“I think people remember certainty more clearly than it existed.”

She considered.

“That’s irritating.”

“Free.”

Ray was contaminating me. Margaret laughed. We finished lunch. Before leaving, she asked: "If the overnight happens, are you willing?" I looked at van. Then Blaze. Katniss. Echo.

"Yes."

No qualifiers. That surprised me. Margaret noticed. She didn't say anything. Good. Echo returned to carrier. Margaret loaded SUV. Three-note whistle. She answered. Then my bad whistle. I answered. They left. Blaze watched SUV go. Katniss did not. I stood beside van. Empty carrier space again. Different today. Not empty. Reserved. Maybe. I shook head.

"No."

Blaze looked up.

"Too early." Tail.

We drove south. No destination. I wanted distance from park. Not from Echo. Just from decision. The road gave me that. Forty minutes later, I saw a field with hundreds of black birds rising at once. I pulled over. Camera. They lifted in waves. Too late. I waited. Most settled. Then something startled them again. The entire field moved upward. Dark shapes against pale sky.

Click. One frame. Good. I checked. Keeper. No metaphor. Absolutely none. Back in van: "Birds." Katniss looked interested.

"Different birds."

She remained interested. Fair. We continued. Evening camp was small and plain. No lake. No river. No historic road. Perfect. Routine. Food. Water. Walk. Blaze found stick. Not his. He carried both for six steps. I stopped. He stopped.

"One."

He looked at original. Then new one. This was moral crisis. He dropped new one. Good dog. Original survived. Katniss climbed onto chair. I made dinner. No bird. Afterward I opened notebook. Echo trial: ~31 min south. 23 min stop. ~31 min return.

Ate both directions. Mild truck reaction. Recovered. Bus reaction stronger. Recovered quickly. Ate afterward. Preened. Vocalized normally. Blaze calm. Katniss calm with physical separation. Then: Priya: Recovery matters. I underlined that once. Then: Possible next step: one controlled overnight. Not tomorrow. I stared. Then wrote: Margaret asked if I want him. Pause. Answer: I don't know. Then: Asked if willing for overnight. Answer: yes.

Different questions. Different answers. Important. I turned page. Mercer. Nothing today. I wrote: Still there. Enough. Then today's photograph: Bird flock over field. Keeper. I almost added: No metaphor. I did. Good. Phone buzzed. Margaret. Home. He ate. Yelled at me. Tried

to open paper towel cabinet. Then: Seems normal. I replied: Good. No joke. She sent: Good?

I stared. Then: Don't start. Three dots. Strong boundaries. I put phone face down. Blaze's tail thumped.

"You too?"

Thunk. Outside, night settled. The van remained unnamed. The carrier space remained empty. Mercer remained unsolved. Echo remained elsewhere. Nothing had changed. Except that maybe tomorrow's questions were becoming different from yesterday's. That was enough.

CHAPTER 41

One Night Is Not a Home

The next morning did not contain Echo. Good. That felt worth noticing. Not because I didn't want to see him. Because yesterday had contained enough. Coffee. Breakfast. Water. One peach. Blaze had his stick. One. Still. Katniss occupied the carrier space. Again. I looked at her.

"You're becoming territorial."

Blink.

"About something that isn't yours."

Slow blink. Fair. I checked phone. Nothing from Priya. Nothing from Margaret. Nothing from Ray. Excellent. We left camp without a plan beyond south. The road crossed open country. Fields. Low ridges. Farmhouses far apart. Clouds had thinned overnight. Sun bright. Too bright for photographs. I drove. Blaze watched. Katniss slept. The Volkswagen remained quiet. No rear click.

The spoon had been defeated. I considered calling Ray again just to remind him. Didn't. Growth. Around ten, we reached a town with one stoplight and two antique stores. Dangerous ratio. I kept driving. Then saw a used bookstore. Worse. I slowed. Did not stop. Thirty seconds later, I turned around.

"Temporary weakness."

Blaze's tail moved. The bookstore occupied half of an old storefront. The other half sold fishing tackle. Books and hooks. Efficient. Cool day. Animals secure. Short stop. Inside, shelves leaned. Not dangerously. Probably. I hated that word. The owner sat behind counter reading a paperback with no cover. Older woman. Silver hair. Red glasses.

"Need help?"

"No."

"Good."

I liked her immediately. I wandered. History. Natural history. Photography. Travel. Local. Nothing Mercer. Good.

Then a shelf labeled: **OLD MAPS / LOCAL EPHEMERA / THINGS NOBODY ELSE WANTS** That was unfair. I looked. Postcards. Road maps. Church programs. Farm auction flyers. A motel brochure. One folded county map from 1968. No Mercer. I smiled. Apparently I had expected one. I kept browsing. A small book on nineteenth-century photographic processes caught me. Not rare.

Reprint. Useful. I opened it. Wet plate. Albumen prints. Glass negatives. Exposure times. Field equipment. Heavy equipment. Chemicals. Tripods. Fragile plates. Not casual work. That mattered. Whoever Mercer had been, if those photographs really belonged to one person, they had not wandered around snapping pictures because something looked nice. Photography then required intention. Preparation. Weight. Time. I bought the book.

At counter, the woman looked at title.

“Photographer?”

“Sometimes.”

“Old cameras?”

“Old photographs.”

“Family?”

“No.”

She looked interested.

“That’s usually worse.”

“Why?”

“Family gives you names.”

Good point. I paid. Outside, Blaze sniffed bag.

“Still not food.”

Katniss investigated anyway. We walked one block. There was a mural. A bakery. A laundromat. A bench under a tree. Nothing demanded attention. Good. At the bench, I opened the photography book. Read two pages. Then six. Field photographers in the late nineteenth century often worked with bulky cameras and glass plates.

Depending on process, equipment could include chemicals, plate holders, dark cloth, tripod, and sometimes portable darkroom arrangements. I looked at road. Mercer carrying all that. Maybe by wagon. Maybe horseback. Maybe with somebody else. Suddenly the old photographs felt heavier. Literally.

I wrote in notebook: **Mercer photographs required planning. Not casual snapshots.**

Then: **If route-focused, why? Survey? Documentation? Personal project? Work?**

Then: **Who carried equipment?** Interesting. Blaze lay beneath bench. Katniss sat beside me. No answer. Good. We continued south. Around noon, Priya called. I pulled into roadside picnic area before answering.

"Morning."

"Still morning?"

"Technically."

"Echo was normal overnight."

"Good."

There it was. She continued.

"Margaret says appetite normal. Sleep normal. Vocalizing normal. Cabinet security unsuccessful."

"Expected."

"She'd like to proceed with the overnight trial."

I looked at empty carrier space. Katniss was not in it this time. Progress.

"When?"

"Tomorrow evening, if you're still willing."

Not tonight. Good.

"Where?"

"County campground about fifteen minutes from Margaret's house."

Close. Controlled. Easy exit.

"One night?"

"One."

"Margaret nearby?"

"Yes."

"Priya nearby?"

"I'll be available. I won't camp with you."

"Strong boundaries."

She laughed.

"Developing."

Contagious. We discussed setup. Echo arrives before dark. Carrier secured. Separate sleeping arrangement. Katniss physically blocked from access. Blaze restrained as needed. Food and nectar prepared. Cleaning supplies. Temperature monitoring. No free flight in van. No improvising.

"Morning pickup?"

“Margaret will come early.”

“How early?”

“Seven.”

I considered coffee.

“Acceptable.”

Priya paused.

“Still willing?”

I looked at Blaze. Then Katniss. Then van.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

There it was again. We hung up. No dramatic reaction. I ate lunch. Turkey sandwich. Apple. Coffee. No metaphor. Katniss watched traffic. Blaze watched sandwich.

“Different priorities.”

After lunch we drove. Not toward campground. Not yet. South. The road entered rolling hills. Dry grass. Scattered oaks. Long fences. I stopped once for photograph. Not because of subject. Because of shadow. A fence line ran across hillside. Cloud shadow cut the field in half. One lone tree stood in light. Too obvious. I waited. Shadow moved.

Tree disappeared. Better. Now fence alone divided dark and light. Click. Keeper. No tree. Good. We kept going. Afternoon brought a small reservoir. Not yesterday’s. Different. We stopped for water. Walk. Stretch. Katniss handled trail well. Blaze carried stick. One. Still. At shoreline, a boy was skipping rocks. Poorly. Bone structure did not improve skipping ability. I had tested.

The boy threw. Three skips. Then sink. He looked pleased. I took no picture. Good. We drove north again late afternoon. Temporary reversal. Toward tomorrow’s campground. I did not want to arrive from two hours away. That would turn overnight into logistics. Instead, we camped twelve miles south. Small public site. No hookups. No lake. No reason to photograph.

Perfect. I checked van. Not obsessively. Carrier anchor. Barrier. Ventilation. Temperature sensor. Towels. Nectar supplies. Cleaning container. Enough. Katniss watched from chair.

“Tomorrow.”

Blink. Blaze had no opinion. Dinner. After dark, Margaret texted. **He’s been loud all afternoon. I assume this is your fault.**

I replied: **No evidence.**

Then: **Did Priya tell you tomorrow?** **Yes.** Pause.

Then: **I'm nervous.** I looked at screen.

Typed: **Reasonable.** Deleted.

Typed: **Me too.** Sent. Three dots. **Good.** Apparently honesty had joined the conspiracy. Sleep came slowly. Not badly. Just slowly. The next day was deliberately boring. Coffee. Breakfast. Walk. Fuel. Groceries. No historical society. No bookstore. No repair shop. No wildlife emergency. Excellent. At noon, I checked supplies once. Only once. Then again.

"Twice."

Katniss looked at me.

"Still reasonable."

Three times would be concern. At four, we drove to county campground. Site near exit. Priya's choice. Smart. Margaret arrived at four thirty. Echo announced himself before I saw carrier. Three notes. Margaret answered. Then my bad whistle. I answered.

"Strong boundaries," Margaret said.

"No longer developing."

"Clearly."

Priya arrived five minutes later. She inspected site. Shade. Distance from other campers. Temperature. Van setup. Carrier anchor. Barrier. Then animals. Blaze calm. Katniss interested. Echo alert.

"Tonight isn't a test you pass," Priya said.

I looked at her.

"What is it?"

"Information."

Good.

"If anything looks wrong, we stop."

"Good."

Margaret looked at Echo.

"You hear that?"

Echo chewed perch.

"No commitment."

He whistled. Margaret sighed. We settled gradually. Echo's carrier secured inside. Katniss separated. Blaze outside with me first. No crowding. No introduction ceremony. Just evening. Margaret stayed for dinner. Echo ate nectar. That helped. Blaze ate. Katniss ate. I ate. Margaret picked at sandwich.

"You're not hungry."

“No.”

“Bad sign?”

“For me?”

“Yes.”

She smiled.

“Probably.”

I looked at her.

“Sorry.”

“No you’re not.”

“No.”

Echo made quiet sounds. Not whistles. Margaret relaxed slightly. Sun dropped. This was the part different from every other trial. Dark. Cars fewer. Temperature lower. Routine changing. Echo became more active for about twenty minutes. Climbed. Chewed. Called. Then called louder. Margaret looked at Priya. Priya watched. No alarm.

“Normal?”

I asked. Margaret nodded.

“He does this around this time.”

Good. Then three-note whistle. Margaret answered. Again. She answered. Then Echo waited. Margaret looked at me.

“That’s usually when Diane would cover part of his cage.”

Priya nodded.

“Do the normal routine.”

Margaret had brought his familiar sleep cover. Not full dark. Partial. Airflow open. She placed it carefully. Echo quieted. Not instantly. Gradually. Interesting. Katniss heard every sound. She sat behind barrier. Watching. No stalking posture. No crouch. Still management. Blaze lay near door. At seven thirty, Margaret stood.

“This is strange.”

“Yes.”

“I don’t like leaving him.”

“You can take him home.”

“I know.”

Priya said nothing. Good. Margaret looked at Echo. Then at me.

“Call me if anything feels wrong.”

“I will.”

“Anything.”

"Yes."

"Not just emergency."

"Yes."

She looked unconvinced.

I added:

"Even if I just think he's unhappy."

That helped. She nodded. Three-note whistle. Margaret answered from doorway. Then left. Priya stayed another fifteen minutes. She went over overnight plan again. No free roaming. No shared space with cat. Keep temperature stable. Monitor droppings. Food and water access. Keep environment quiet.

Call if respiratory changes, prolonged panic, repeated crashing against carrier, refusal to settle, or anything else concerning. Then she left too. Just us. Four. Technically. I did not count that again. Blaze. Katniss. Echo. Me. The van felt different. Not crowded. Not exactly. More occupied. Echo made one whistle. I ignored it. Second. Ignored. Third. I answered. Bad decision.

He repeated. Blaze's ear moved. Katniss stared.

"Nobody encourage anyone."

Silence. Good. I read. Not Mercer book. Different book. Important. Twenty minutes. Echo shifted. Then settled. Temperature stable. Blaze asleep. Katniss not asleep. Of course. I watched her more than Echo. She watched carrier. Then looked at me.

"Absolutely not."

Blink. She moved to bench. Good. At nine, Echo made soft clicking sounds. I checked. Normal posture. No panic. Water. Food. Fine.

I texted Margaret: **Settled. Eating. Quiet. Temperature stable.** Reply immediate. **Thank you.**

Then: **Is he whistling?**

I typed: **Only when he wants attention.** Three dots. **So constantly.** Fair. I put phone down. Ten o'clock. Echo quiet. Blaze asleep. Katniss finally asleep. I should have been. Wasn't. I listened. Van creaks. Wind. Distant campground voices. One owl. Echo shifted occasionally. Every sound became information. That was exhausting. At ten forty-seven, Echo climbed. I looked.

He moved to water. Drank. Returned. Fine. Eleven thirty. Still fine. Midnight. I stopped checking clock. Probably. At some point, I slept. Not well. But slept. I woke before dawn to a sound. Three notes. Quiet. Not loud. Three notes again. I opened eyes. Dark blue morning. Blaze awake. Katniss awake. Echo awake. I sat up. Three notes.

Diane's whistle. No Margaret to answer. I waited. Again. Something in me tightened. I could answer. But it wasn't mine. I didn't. Echo waited. Then made my bad whistle. That one was mine enough. I answered. He repeated. Blaze's tail moved once against floor. Thunk. Katniss looked offended by morning. Normal. I started coffee quietly. Echo became more active as light increased.

Cover partly removed. Food checked. Water refreshed. Nectar prepared. He ate. Good. At six fifteen, he vocalized loudly. Very loudly. I nearly spilled coffee.

"Excellent."

Blaze stood. Katniss retreated. Echo yelled again.

I texted Margaret: **He is awake.**

She replied: **I can hear him from here.** I looked around. Impossible.

Then another message: **Kidding. Leaving now.** Cruel. Seven minutes later, SUV arrived. Not seven o'clock. Six twenty-three. Strong boundaries had failed. Margaret came quickly. Not running. Almost. Echo saw her. Three notes. She answered. Then he started yelling. Margaret laughed.

"Good morning."

I handed her coffee. She looked surprised.

"You made me one?"

"Emergency response."

She took it. Priya arrived at six forty-five. Also early. Nobody had boundaries. She checked Echo. Bright. Eating. Normal posture. No obvious stress. She asked about night. I gave report. Settled. Drank. Moved normally. No panic. One early-morning three-note whistle. Then my whistle. Normal dawn vocalization. Priya looked at Margaret.

"How is that compared to home?"

Margaret smiled.

"Annoyingly normal."

Good. Priya checked carrier. Food. Water. Droppings. Temperature record.

Then she said:

"Useful night."

Not successful. Not good. Useful. I liked that better. Margaret looked at me.

"How was it for you?"

I thought.

"Poor sleep."

She laughed.

"No, really."

"Really."

Then:

"It was fine."

"Fine?"

"Different."

"Bad different?"

"No."

"Good different?"

I looked at Echo.

"I don't know."

Margaret nodded. Good answer. Priya sat at picnic table with clipboard. Actual clipboard. Danger. She reviewed next steps. No decision today. Again. Echo had tolerated driving. Stops. Van. Evening. Night. Morning. That established possibility. Not preference. Important distinction.

"We still need to think about long-term welfare," Priya said.

"Travel schedule."

"Yes."

"Access to avian vets."

"Yes."

"Temperature extremes."

"Yes."

"Enrichment."

"Yes."

"Cleaning."

"Yes."

"Katniss."

"Very yes."

Margaret smiled.

"Blaze."

"Also yes."

"Noise."

"Yes."

"Routine."

"Yes."

"And what happens if Bone wants to hike somewhere Echo can't go."

I looked at her.

"That's a real question."

"Exactly."

Good. This was not about whether one night worked. It was about whether months could. Different scale. Margaret sat beside Echo.

"He looked happy this morning."

Priya answered carefully.

"He looked comfortable this morning."

Margaret nodded. Difference. Important. I liked Priya. Echo whistled. My bad one. I looked at him.

"You are damaging credibility."

He repeated. Margaret laughed. We packed slowly. Echo returned to Margaret's SUV. No resistance. No dramatic reaching toward van. Good. Three-note whistle. Margaret answered. Then they left. I watched SUV go. Blaze beside me. Katniss on side step. Three again. Us. I looked at empty carrier space. Not reserved. Not empty. Just space. Better. Priya remained a moment.

"You okay?"

"Yes."

"You look tired."

"Bird."

She laughed.

"Welcome to parrots."

"No."

She got into car.

Before leaving:

"We'll talk in a few days."

"Good."

I let that one pass. Camp quiet again. I sat. Coffee. Second cup. Blaze lay down. Katniss reclaimed carrier space within thirty seconds. I pointed.

"Predictable."

Purr. After breakfast, I opened notebook. **Echo overnight trial.** Then details. Not feelings first. **Arrived before dark. Ate normally. Evening vocalization consistent with home routine. Settled after familiar partial cover. Drank overnight. No panic. Normal movement. Dawn

vocalization. Ate in morning.** **Katniss managed with physical separation. No direct access.** **Blaze calm.** **Temperature stable.**

Then: **Priya: Useful night. Possibility is not preference.** I underlined that.

Then: **Long-term questions remain.** I listed them. Vet access. Heat. Cold. Routine. Enrichment. Cleaning. Stops. Hikes. Predator separation. Noise. Emergency planning. Then I paused.

Wrote: **Did I want him here?** Long pause.

Then: **Sometimes.** That surprised me.

Next: **Did I want him gone?** Another pause. **No.** I stared. Not decision. Information. Good. Turned page. Mercer.

Read yesterday's note: **Mercer photographs required planning. Not casual snapshots.** Then I looked at camera. One century apart. Same problem. Choosing what deserved effort.

I wrote: **Need to learn what field photography in 1890 would have required on Olympic Peninsula specifically. Equipment may tell us what kind of work Mercer was doing.** That felt useful. Not revelation. Direction. Good. We left campground at nine. South. Again. No bird. No clipboard. No overnight supplies visible. Just road. Twenty minutes later, I saw morning fog lifting from low pasture.

Fence posts disappeared into white. One barn barely visible. I pulled over. Camera. First frame. Too much barn. Moved. Second. Fence leading into fog. Barn only a shape. Better. Waited. Fog shifted. For three seconds, sunlight touched only the nearest post. Click. Gone. Keeper. Back at van, Katniss watched from passenger seat. Blaze had stick. One. Still. I climbed in.

"Good morning."

Neither answered. Perfect.

CHAPTER 42

Before the First Hole

I slept better without a bird. That seemed unfair. Morning was cool. Fog mostly gone. Blaze stretched beside the van. Katniss occupied the passenger seat before I had finished coffee. Everything had returned to its usual dimensions. Almost.

The carrier anchor and supplies remained. So did the empty space. I stopped looking at it. Breakfast. Water. Map. No appointment today. Priya had said a few days. Margaret had said nothing since yesterday afternoon. Echo was home. Good. I opened the book on nineteenth-century photography instead. That lasted twelve minutes.

Glass plates. Chemicals. Tripods. Portable darkrooms. Mercer had required more equipment to take one photograph than I currently required to make breakfast. I turned a page. Read about plate holders. Turned another. Then realized I had read the same paragraph three times. The bird had followed me without being present. Annoying. I closed the book. Katniss looked over.

“Don’t.”

She hadn’t done anything. Fair. I made another coffee. That did not fix it. So I went inside the van and looked up. Not metaphorically. Ceiling. Cabinets. Rear wall. Storage. The trial carrier sat low because low was stable. That made sense for testing. It made less sense for months.

Echo could tolerate the carrier. We had established that. Thirty minutes. An hour. One night. But tolerating something and living in it were different. Priya had made that distinction several times. So had the bird. Without saying it.

I measured the carrier. Then the wall. Then the open space above one rear cabinet. Katniss appeared. Of course. She sat directly beneath measuring tape.

“This concerns you.” She looked up.

Good. At least one of us understood. I drew a rectangle in notebook. Too small. Crossed it out. Another. Too deep. Would steal headroom. Another. Longer. Shallower. Higher. No. Too close to roof. Heat. I lowered it. Better.

A permanent enclosure did not need to be enormous. It needed to be large enough for Echo to move comfortably while the van moved. Stable perch positions. Food. Water. Room to climb. Enough space that hours on road didn't mean hours in a box designed only to transport him from one building to another. I drew again. Blaze came inside. Looked at floor. Then at me. Then lay down.

Useful contribution. The enclosure could run along the upper rear side without taking Katniss's normal bench or Blaze's usual floor space. I measured again. Katniss followed the tape.

"You are making this slower."

She touched it.

"Very."

I wrote: Permanent travel enclosure. Not carrier. Then: Must not take over van. Underlined that. That was the actual problem. Somewhere during the trials, we'd started solving for Echo as though every other living thing could simply rearrange itself around him. That wasn't fair. Not to Blaze. Not to Katniss. Not even to Echo.

If he came, he needed to join the life already happening. Change it, yes. Erase it, no. I drew the enclosure again. Long enough for movement. Deep enough to turn and climb. Not so large it became unstable. Then mounting. Bolted solidly to van? Safe from shifting. Bad for vibration. I looked at the cabinet. Then remembered the spoon.

Old Volkswagens transferred information through vibration. Echo did not need that much information. I wrote: Rigid support frame. Isolation between frame and enclosure. Rubber bushings. Dense elastomer pads. Something that absorbed vibration without letting enclosure swing. Not bungee cords alone. Too much motion. A bird cage on elastic suspension could become a pendulum. Bad.

But short restrained elastic support? Maybe. Secondary safety straps. Mechanical stops. No uncontrolled movement. I drew cross-section. Ugly. Useful. Katniss stepped onto notebook.

"No."

She sat. I moved notebook. She followed.

"Your objection has been entered into record."

No response. Door arrangement. Main access. Smaller feeding door. Removable tray. Rounded interior hardware. Nothing sharp. No exposed fasteners where Echo could reach them. Perches. Not directly

front-to-back if sudden braking could throw him along perch. Maybe lateral and slightly staggered. Lower rather than high. Different diameter. Natural untreated wood appropriate for bird use. I wrote: Ask Priya. Don't invent bird engineering.

Good. Ventilation. Already van ventilation. But enclosure needed open airflow. No direct draft. No cooking fumes. Far enough from stove. Very important. I looked toward stove. Too close. Moved design eighteen inches. Better. Temperature sensor nearby. Not inside where Echo could destroy it. I imagined him destroying it. Likely. Then Katniss. That was harder.

The permanent enclosure itself solved most of everyday problem. Secure bars. Secure latches. Cat couldn't reach through. Or couldn't be allowed to. Spacing mattered. Distance from surfaces she could launch from. I looked around. Everything in a Volkswagen was a surface a cat could launch from. Excellent.

So enclosure needed a solid lower and partial side shield where Katniss could approach. Not opaque everywhere. Echo needed visibility. But enough separation that a paw could never reach him through bars. I drew a stand-off panel. Then temporary divider for out-of-enclosure time. Foldable. Mesh. Stored flat.

Katniss could still have most of van most of day. Echo could have supervised freedom while she was physically separated. Then divider disappeared. Better. Blaze? Simpler. Harness point. Bed. Command. Supervision. Still not trust. Management. But ordinary management. I looked at page. It had become complicated. I almost closed notebook. Then looked again.

Actually, it wasn't. One enclosure. One fold-away divider. One storage bin. One routine. Manageable. I wrote at top: If this requires rebuilding the whole van, answer is no. That felt right. Then below it: If it can become one more piece of the van, maybe. I didn't like the last word. Left it. Around eleven, I drove into town. Needed hardware store.

No. Not hardware. I stopped myself before parking. Design first. Approval later. Build only if Echo actually came. Good. Instead I bought painter's tape. Cardboard. A ruler. Cheap foam weather stripping. None of that committed the van to anything. Probably. I froze.

"Retired."

The cashier looked at me.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Back at camp, I made a mock-up. Not a cage. A box. Cardboard. Tape. Approximate dimensions. It looked ridiculous. Good. Ridiculous was

cheap. I taped the outline high along rear wall. Placed cardboard box beneath. Measured headroom. Door clearance. Cabinet access. Katniss appeared instantly. She sat beneath it.

"This is conceptual." Blink.

"You are not being displaced."

She remained unconvinced. Blaze walked through. No issue. I opened cabinet. Still usable. Stove. Enough distance. Sleeping space. Fine. I sat where I normally sat. Didn't hit head. Good. Then I stood in doorway. Looked. It changed van. Of course. But it didn't own van. That was important. I took photographs. Not art. Reference. Front. Side. Clearance. Cabinet access.

Then made sketch cleaner. Dimensions. Mounting points. Isolation concept. Safety strap. Tray. Perches. Divider storage. I did not write Echo's name on it. Not deliberately. Actually I almost did. Stopped. This wasn't his yet. At two, I texted Priya. I have a design question before anyone starts talking about placement. She replied six minutes later. That's usually when I like design questions.

I sent photos of cardboard mock-up and sketch. Long pause. Then: Interesting. Can I look at it in person tomorrow? I typed: Yes. Nothing has been built. Reply: Good. I stared. Then another message: Because if I don't like the design, I'm going to ask you to redesign it. Better. I smiled. Reasonable. Then caught myself. Fine. That word could stay.

Priya asked if Margaret should come. I thought. Yes. She should see what we're talking about. Then another thought. But no Echo necessary. This is about van layout. Priya replied: Agreed. Good. The rest of afternoon belonged to road. I packed cardboard mock-up flat. Did not leave it installed. Important. South again. No urgency. Blaze slept. Katniss watched fields.

I found a county road that followed an old rail line. Not Mercer old. Just old enough. A rusted signal stood beside tracks no longer in use. I stopped. Camera. First frame included too much sky. Second too much road.

Then I moved behind a low fence. Signal at edge. Tracks disappearing. Road beyond. Click. Good. Keeper. No mystery. No metaphor required. We drove another hour. Phone buzzed. Margaret. Priya says you're designing something. I waited until pullout. Typed: Cardboard. Mostly. For Echo? I looked at van. Then: For possibility. Longer pause. Okay. Then: Thank you for not building it yet.

That mattered. I replied: Would be strange to build a bird apartment before knowing whether bird is moving in. She sent laughing face. Good. Later she wrote: I think Diane would've liked that you overthink things.

I stared. Typed: I don't overthink. I think repeatedly until everyone else gets tired. Her reply: That sounds worse. Fair.

Camp that night was beside trees. No special view. No water. No historical marker. Perfect. Dinner. Walk. Book. I read another section on nineteenth-century field photography. Portable darkrooms. Prepared plates. Weather. Transport. Fragility. Mercer again. I wrote: If Mercer traveled repeatedly with camera equipment, there may have been an assistant, wagon, pack animal, or established route support. Search records for photographers/survey parties, not just name.

That opened something. Maybe E. Mercer wasn't hidden because Mercer was mysterious. Maybe I had been searching wrong category. Photographer. Surveyor. Newspaper. Engineer. Expedition support. Commercial documentation. Not every photographer called themselves photographer. Good. I closed notebook. One problem at a time. Tomorrow: bird architecture. That phrase was terrible. I wrote it anyway. Morning arrived clear. We drove back toward county park. Priya already there. Margaret too.

No Echo. Good. Margaret looked at cardboard.

"That's it?"

"Prototype."

"It looks like a shipping box."

"Advanced engineering."

Priya laughed. We opened van. I rebuilt mock-up with tape. Priya stood outside at first. Didn't touch anything. Looked. Then climbed in. She measured. Checked stove distance. Window. Ventilation. Cabinet. Roof. Door. Margaret watched from doorway. Katniss watched from passenger seat. Blaze lay outside. Priya pointed. "Why here?"

"Preserves floor."

"Why not higher?"

"Heat. Also vibration."

She nodded.

"Why this long?"

"Movement."

"Why this depth?"

"Enough room without taking head space."

She looked at sketch. Then: "What's this?"

"Isolation mount."

"Explain."

I did. Rigid structural frame. Enclosure mounted through vibration-damping bushings or pads. Restricted movement. Secondary safety straps. No swinging. Priya nodded slowly.

“Good instinct.”

Margaret looked at me.

“You thought about suspension.”

“Spoon.”

She waited.

“Long story.”

Priya looked at enclosure footprint.

“I wouldn’t use ordinary bungees as primary support.”

“Neither would I.”

“Good.”

“Too much movement.”

“Exactly.”

She pointed to lower sketch.

“I’d want this side shield higher.”

“For Katniss?”

“Yes.”

Katniss looked offended by being named. Priya continued.

“Also I’d move this perch.”

“Why?”

“Too high for travel. Sudden braking, bird loses balance, farther fall.”

I erased. Lowered.

“Second perch?”

“Different diameter. Stable. Not directly aligned with the direction of travel.”

I drew. Margaret leaned closer.

“This is strange.”

“Yes.”

“Seeing his space in somebody else’s van.”

I stopped drawing. Priya did too. Nobody improved sentence. Good. After a minute, Margaret said: “But it doesn’t take over.” That was the question.

“No.”

She stepped inside. Looked around. Bench still usable. Cabinets mostly accessible. Katniss's usual places unchanged. Blaze's floor area unchanged. Margaret touched cardboard edge.

"How does he get out?"

"Main door here."

"And then?"

"Temporary divider."

I unfolded sketch. Mesh divider from ceiling rail to floor anchor. Stored flat when not used. Separates Katniss physically while Echo gets supervised out time. Margaret looked at Katniss.

"For how long?"

"However long Echo needs."

Priya corrected gently.

"However long both animals tolerate comfortably."

Right. I nodded.

"Then divider comes down."

"So Katniss doesn't lose half the van permanently." Margaret said.

"Exactly."

Priya looked pleased.

"That's important."

I looked at her.

"I thought you'd want permanent separation."

"Permanent secure separation when nobody is actively supervising, yes. That's what enclosure provides."

She tapped sketch.

"When Echo is out, physical separation from Katniss."

"Temporary."

"Yes."

"Blaze?"

"Same principle, but he's easier to manage with restraint and position. Still don't rely on obedience alone."

Fair. Margaret sat.

"What about when Bone hikes?"

There it was again. Priya looked at me.

"What do you currently do with Blaze and Katniss?"

"Depends on trail, weather, distance."

"Echo changes that."

"Yes."

"You may need shorter excursions when he's with you. Or bird-safe destinations. Or occasionally boarding. Or someone trusted."

Margaret said: "He's not going to stay in a cage all day while everybody hikes."

"No." Priya said.

Good. I looked at cardboard enclosure. This was why one successful night was not enough. Not safety alone. Life. I asked: "What if I decide this changes travel too much?" Priya answered immediately.

"Then you say no."

Margaret looked at her. Priya continued.

"That's not failure. That's the point of doing this before placement."

Good.

"And if design works?" I asked.

"Then design works."

"That's not decision."

"No."

Good. Margaret looked at me.

"What do you think?"

I took time.

"I think I could build this."

"That's not what I asked."

I looked at her.

"I know."

Silence. Then: "I think I could live with this." Margaret nodded. Different answer. Priya looked at sketch.

"I'd want an avian vet or experienced enclosure builder to review final dimensions and materials before construction."

"Fine."

"And no galvanized hardware where he can chew."

"Fine."

"No toxic coatings."

"Fine."

"Easy cleaning."

"Yes."

"Secure latches."

"Yes."

"Secondary restraint for travel."

"Yes."

"Good ventilation without direct draft."

"Yes."

"Temperature monitoring."

"Yes."

She smiled.

"You've done this conversation before."

"Repeatedly."

Margaret laughed. I looked at sketch. Something had shifted. Not decision. Closer. Priya folded arms.

"We've tested driving."

I nodded.

"We've tested stops."

Yes.

"Evening."

Yes.

"Overnight."

Yes.

"Morning."

Yes.

"We've identified the long-term management issues."

Yes.

"And now we have a plausible housing design that doesn't require rebuilding your whole van."

I looked at cardboard.

"Plausible."

"That's the word."

Then she said: "I don't think we learn much more by continuing to invent tests." There it was. Margaret looked at her. I did too. Priya continued.

"At some point, more testing stops being information and starts being avoidance."

Quiet. That landed harder than expected. Margaret looked down. Priya softened slightly.

"I'm not telling either of you what decision to make."

Good.

“But I think you have enough information to make one.”

There it was. Finally. I sat. Katniss jumped onto bench beside me. Margaret watched her.

“She gets a vote?”

“No.”

Katniss blinked.

“She has advisory status.”

Margaret smiled. Priya checked calendar.

“I’d like you both to think tonight.”

“Not weeks?”

“No.”

“Not another trial?”

“Not unless one of you identifies a specific unanswered question that actually requires one.”

Excellent. Margaret exhaled.

“Tomorrow?”

Priya nodded.

“If you’re both ready.”

I looked at Margaret. She looked at me. Neither answered immediately. Then Margaret said: “Tomorrow.” I nodded.

“Tomorrow.”

Priya packed clipboard. No ceremony. Good. We took cardboard down. Important. The van returned to normal. No enclosure. No new holes. No bird. Just tape marks I removed with thumb. Margaret stood beside van.

“I thought I’d feel worse.”

“About tomorrow?”

“About being close to tomorrow.”

I waited. She looked toward parking lot.

“I still don’t know what I’ll say.”

“Neither do I.”

She nodded. Then: “That helps.” I wasn’t sure why. She left. Priya left. Blaze climbed into van. Katniss reclaimed passenger seat. Three again. For one more night. I drove south. Not far. Found a quiet campground. Parked. No photographs. Didn’t need one. Dinner. Walk. Coffee. I opened notebook. Echo enclosure concept reviewed. Then details.

Permanent travel enclosure high rear side. Preserve existing floor/bench space. Rigid structural support with vibration isolation. No free swinging. Secondary safety restraint. Lower stable perches. Shielding to prevent cat paw access. Temporary fold-away divider for supervised out time. Katniss keeps normal van access otherwise. Blaze managed separately when Echo out. Final design requires avian-specific review before construction.

Then: Nothing built unless placement decided. Underlined. Then: Priya: more testing may now be avoidance. Enough information to decide. I stared. Tomorrow. I turned page. Mercer. Not tonight. Closed notebook. Outside, evening wind moved through trees. Blaze slept. Katniss sat in doorway. The van was exactly as it had been yesterday. No cage. No bird. No permanent changes.

That mattered. Tomorrow, maybe something would.

CHAPTER 43

The Answer

Morning arrived before I wanted it. That seemed appropriate. I made coffee. Blaze went outside. Katniss took the passenger seat. The van looked exactly the same as yesterday. No cardboard. No tape. No bird enclosure. No bird. Good. I opened notebook. Closed it. Opened it again. Nothing had changed overnight. That was the problem.

Priya had said we had enough information. Margaret had said tomorrow. I had said tomorrow. Tomorrow had become today. Inconsiderate. Breakfast. Water. Coffee. More coffee. Blaze watched me.

“Administrative.” He yawned.

Katniss looked out window. No concern. I envied both of them. The meeting wasn’t until ten. It was seven twelve. Three hours and forty-eight minutes was too much time to think. So I drove. Not far. Just enough.

A county road wandered through pasture and low hills. Morning light soft. Fog holding in hollows. Normally I would have stopped. Didn’t. Camera stayed beside me. That felt wrong. Then fine. At eight fifteen I pulled into a turnout overlooking fields. No dramatic view. No river. No old road. No mysterious photograph. Just fields. Fence. Cloud. Perfect. I sat on side step. Blaze beside me. Katniss remained inside.

I tried to answer the question directly. Did I want Echo? Wrong question. Did I want another animal? Also wrong. Did I want more noise? No. Easy. Did I want more cleaning? No. Also easy. Did I want to redesign part of van? Not especially.

Did I want to think about avian vets, temperature, nectar, enrichment, safe stops, and making sure Katniss never got one lucky second? Absolutely not. That seemed promising. Then: Did I want Echo to go somewhere else? I waited. Maybe. If somewhere else was better. That answer had always been true. But if somewhere else wasn’t better? Different question.

I looked through open van door. Katniss had moved from passenger seat to bench. Blaze leaned against my leg. This had already happened

twice. First Blaze. Then Katniss. Neither had arrived because I needed something. They had arrived because eventually leaving them behind made less sense than continuing together. I didn't know if that was happening again. Maybe.

I stood.

"Helpful." Blaze's tail moved.

We drove back. At nine forty-eight, Margaret's SUV was already at the county park. Of course. Priya wasn't. Good. Margaret sat at picnic table. No Echo. I noticed immediately. I parked. Blaze came out on leash. Katniss stayed in van. Margaret looked toward passenger window. "Where's Katniss?"

"Judging."

"Normal."

I sat across from her. No small talk. Interesting. Margaret had coffee. Didn't drink it. I had coffee. Did. Finally she said: "I didn't bring him."

"I noticed."

"I thought this should happen without him sitting there being colorful."

"Good."

She smiled slightly. Then quiet. Priya arrived at ten exactly. Clipboard. Of course. She sat. Didn't open it. Better.

"Before we start," she said, "I want to make one thing clear."

Margaret looked at her. I did too.

"This is not about passing a test."

We had heard that. Still useful.

"Echo is not a reward for doing everything correctly. Bone is not obligated to take him because the trials worked. Margaret is not obligated to place him because travel appears possible."

Good.

"And if either of you says no today, that's an acceptable answer."

Margaret nodded. I did too. Priya continued.

"What we know is that Echo has tolerated the van, short drives, longer drives, a stop, an overnight, unfamiliar surroundings, and waking away from Margaret's house."

She looked at me.

"We know Bone has taken the safety requirements seriously."

Then Margaret.

"We know Margaret has been honest about what she can and can't provide long-term."

Then both.

"We know there are still risks and work."

Katniss. Blaze. Heat. Cold. Travel. Noise. Veterinary access. Routine. Nothing new. That was reassuring. Priya finally opened clipboard.

"Margaret."

Margaret looked down.

"Do you still believe rehoming Echo is the right choice?"

There it was. Margaret didn't answer immediately. Her fingers tightened around coffee cup. Then: "Yes." Quiet. No speech. No tears. Just yes. Priya waited. Margaret continued.

"I don't want to."

Different thing.

"But yes."

She looked at table.

"My house worked when Diane was alive because Diane's life worked for him."

I listened.

"She was home. She talked to him all day. She took him places. She built everything around him without even thinking about it."

Pause.

"I can't do that."

No apology. Good.

"I leave too long. I'm tired when I get home. He gets louder because he's bored and lonely, and then I get frustrated because he's loud."

She rubbed thumb against cup.

"That's not fair to him."

Priya nodded. Margaret looked at me.

"And I think I've known that for a while."

I didn't say anything.

"I just kept thinking that if I let him go, I was letting Diane go."

The three-note whistle lived somewhere in memory. Margaret breathed out.

"I'm not."

No one interrupted. Then she said: "I still want to be part of his life if that's possible." That mattered. I answered before Priya.

"It is."

Margaret looked at me. I hadn't decided yet. Maybe I had. Priya noticed. Of course. She turned to me.

"Bone."

Danger.

"Do you want Echo placed with you?"

There was no good way around it. I looked toward van. Blaze lay in shade. Katniss visible through window. No Echo. Good. I thought of the carrier. The whistle. The cardboard box. The bus. The paper towels. The way Margaret had said everything got smaller.

Then I thought about the question I had written after overnight. Did I want him there? Sometimes. Did I want him gone? No. That wasn't enough. I took longer. Priya waited. Margaret waited. No one helped. Good. Finally: "Yes." The word felt bigger than expected. I added: "If you both think this is actually good for him." Priya shook head slightly.

"That's not how this part works."

I looked at her.

"You don't get to hand the decision back to us after making it."

Fair. She continued.

"I can tell you I believe the placement is reasonable."

Not perfect. Not guaranteed. Reasonable.

"I can tell you you've shown that you're willing to change routines, learn his care, and stop if something isn't working."

She nodded toward van.

"And importantly, you're trying to fit Echo into the life that's already there instead of turning everything else into collateral damage."

Katniss would appreciate wording. Priya continued.

"I can't promise he'll love traveling forever."

"Good."

"I can't promise there won't be problems."

"Better."

"I can tell you I would approve the placement with the management plan we've discussed and the enclosure reviewed before permanent installation."

There it was. Approved. Not ordered. Not guaranteed. Margaret looked at me.

"So?"

I looked at her.

"So yes."

This time easier. Margaret cried. Not dramatically. Just suddenly. She turned away. I looked at Priya.

"Do something."

"No."

Helpful. Margaret laughed while crying. Worse. Better.

"I'm okay."

"Clearly."

She wiped eyes.

"This is horrible."

"That seems excessive."

"It's good horrible."

"Still horrible."

She laughed again. Priya finally smiled. Then paperwork happened. Of course. Nothing emotional survived paperwork completely. Useful. Transfer agreement. Medical records. Band number. Diet. Vet information. Emergency contacts. Rescue contact. Known behaviors. Sleep routine. Foods. Foods not to give. Favorite things to destroy. Paper towels received emphasis. I signed where indicated. Then stopped.

"Today?"

Margaret looked at me.

"What?"

"Does he come today?"

Priya answered.

"He can."

I looked at van. No permanent enclosure.

"Carrier."

"For now," Priya said. "Short-term only, while you finalize enclosure."

I nodded. That was acceptable. Not months. Not endless road hours. Temporary. Margaret looked nervous again.

"We could wait a day."

I thought.

"No."

She looked at me.

"If we're doing it, waiting because it's uncomfortable doesn't improve anything."

Priya said nothing. Good. Margaret nodded slowly.

"Okay."

She left to get Echo. Twenty minutes. Maybe thirty. It felt longer. Priya stayed. I walked Blaze. Katniss came out in harness. Routine. Priya watched.

“You’re nervous.”

“No.”

“You’ve reorganized that leash twice.”

I looked down. Apparently.

“Fine.”

She smiled.

“What happens if this doesn’t work?” I asked.

“We reassess.”

“Return?”

“If necessary.”

That mattered. Not failure. Not prison sentence.

“Placement doesn’t mean we stop paying attention.”

Good. Then Margaret’s SUV turned into park. I heard Echo before door opened. Three notes. Margaret answered automatically. Then my bad whistle. I did not answer. Second. Still didn’t. Third. Fine. I answered. Priya looked at me.

“Strong boundaries.”

“Retired.”

Margaret carried carrier over. Echo bright. Alert. Chewing something. He saw me. Bad whistle.

“Yes.”

No ceremony. I liked that. Margaret set carrier on picnic table. Then opened small side access just enough to offer him a familiar treat. He took it. Normal. She stood there. Hand on carrier.

“This is the part I was dreading.”

I didn’t say anything. She looked at Echo.

“You don’t know what’s happening.”

Echo chewed.

“Probably better.”

I let that word live. Margaret touched one finger gently against cage wire. Echo moved toward it. She smiled.

“You are a pain in the ass.”

Priya coughed. Margaret looked at her. “What?”

“Nothing.”

Echo whistled. Three notes. Margaret answered. Then she looked at me.

“You have to answer that one sometimes.”

I shook head.

“No.”

“It’ll make him happy.”

“It was theirs.”

Margaret’s face changed. Not sad exactly. Then: “Maybe it was.” She looked at Echo.

“Doesn’t mean it has to die with her.”

That landed. I looked away.

“Unfair.”

“What?”

“Good argument.”

She smiled.

“Free.”

Ray again. Everywhere. We loaded Echo carefully. Carrier secured at anchor. Temporary. Katniss physically separated. Blaze restrained. Same as trials. Different now. Because nobody was following us back to return him after thirty minutes. Margaret stood outside passenger door.

“Text me.”

“Yes.”

“Pictures.”

“Yes.”

“Tell me if he’s eating.”

“Yes.”

“If he acts weird—“

“I’ll call.”

“If you need anything—“

“I’ll call.”

“If you change your mind—“

I looked at her.

“I’ll call.”

She nodded. Three-note whistle from carrier. Margaret answered. Then stepped back. I started engine. Echo shifted. Then settled. Blaze lay down. Katniss watched. I looked in mirror. Margaret stood beside

Priya. No waving. Good. I pulled out. South. Of course. For the first five minutes, nobody made a sound. Then Echo whistled. Bad one. I answered. Katniss looked toward carrier.

"Management."

She turned to window. Good. Ten minutes. Echo ate. I smiled.

"No celebration."

Blaze yawned. Fifteen minutes. Nothing happened. That was excellent. Twenty. I pulled into quiet roadside turnout. Not because of Echo. Because Blaze needed break. That sentence mattered. We stopped. Engine off. Echo climbed higher in carrier. No Margaret. No Priya. Just us. Four. I noticed. Didn't correct myself. Blaze went out. Katniss stayed separated. I checked Echo. Food. Water. Posture. Fine.

"Welcome."

Echo stared. Then shredded paper. Good. We continued. Not far. I wasn't going to turn first day into an endurance test. Camp was thirty-seven miles south. Small. Quiet. Trees. I chose site. Routine changed. Not destroyed. Blaze out. Water. Walk. Katniss out after Echo secure and protected. Harness. Short exploration. Echo remained in carrier while I set camp.

Then I assembled temporary divider. Mesh. Simple. Katniss on one side. Echo on other. No permanent restriction. I opened carrier. Not van door. Carrier. Echo climbed to secure travel perch I had attached for supervised time. He looked around. Blaze watched from designated spot. Katniss watched through divider. Everyone watched everyone. Excellent. Echo stretched wings. Not full flight. Just stretch.

Then climbed. Investigated. Chewed something allowed. Normal. I sat. No clipboard. No observers. That felt strange. Echo whistled. Three notes. I waited. He repeated. Margaret's words returned. Doesn't mean it has to die with her. I answered. Poorly. Echo froze. Then repeated three notes. I tried again. Worse.

"You're going to regret this."

Echo did my bad whistle. Blaze's tail moved. Katniss sat. I laughed. Fine. After twenty minutes, Echo returned to carrier willingly for food. Good. Divider came down. Katniss got van back. That was the point. Dinner. Dog. Cat. Skeleton. Bird. Different food. Same routine. Mostly. Echo yelled once when I moved bowl.

"Your concerns have been noted."

He yelled again.

"Rejected."

Katniss looked annoyed.

“You’re going to have to work this out.”

Not literally. Never literally. After dark, I used familiar partial cover. Echo settled. Faster than overnight trial. Blaze slept. Katniss took chair. I sat on side step. Phone. Margaret. How is he? I took photograph. Not artistic. Echo in carrier. Eating. Sent. Eating. Complaining. Normal. Reply came fast. Good. Then: I miss him. I stared. Typed: I know.

Nothing clever. Then another message. I’m still glad. I typed: I know that too. Put phone away. Night quieted. No dramatic feeling arrived. I had expected something. Triumph. Fear. Certainty. Instead there was responsibility. That felt more honest. I opened notebook. Wrote date. Then: Echo placed with us today. I stopped. Us. Didn’t cross it out. Then: Temporary carrier only until permanent enclosure reviewed and built.

Then: First day: ate during drive. Settled at camp. Supervised out time behind divider. Katniss retained normal access afterward. Blaze calm. Then: Margaret remains family to him. That mattered enough to underline. I turned page. Mercer. Not tonight. Closed notebook. Echo moved under cover. Soft sound. Katniss lifted head. Then put it down. Blaze slept. Four. I looked around van.

Still the same van. Mostly. No new wall. No permanent cage. No name. Just one more traveler. I leaned back.

“Tomorrow we build nothing.”

From under cover: Bad whistle. I smiled.

“Exactly.”

CHAPTER 44

Making Room Without Taking Over

Echo woke before everyone except me. That was going to become a problem. Not a serious one. Probably. I opened one eye. Dark. Quiet. Almost. Then: Three notes. Soft. I waited. Again. I answered badly. Echo immediately followed with my worse whistle. Fair. Blaze lifted his head. Katniss did not. Progress. I made coffee. Echo climbed inside the temporary carrier. Not frantic. Just awake.

"Morning."

He answered with noise that meant nothing to me. Yet. Blaze stretched. Katniss eventually appeared. She looked toward Echo. Then at breakfast. Good priorities. Routine. Different now. Still routine. Dog food. Cat food. Nectar. Fruit. Coffee. One extra bowl. One extra cleaning step. One extra voice in morning. Not the end of civilization. After breakfast, I texted Margaret. Alive. Loud. Ate.

She replied: Perfect. I looked at Echo.

"Apparently."

No. Retired. I put phone away. The temporary carrier worked. That was the problem. Useful temporary things had a habit of becoming permanent. The carrier could not become that. I looked at wall where cardboard mock-up had been. Nothing there. Good.

The design existed. Priya had reviewed it. Placement had happened. Now the word temporary had an expiration date. I opened notebook. Sketch. Measurements. Corrections. Lower perch. Higher side shield. No chewable galvanized hardware. Vibration isolation. Secondary restraint. Cleanable tray. Ventilation. I stared. Then added: Do not make it look like a prison. That mattered. Not decorative. Not cute. Functional. Safe. Comfortable. Part of van.

Not entire van. I closed notebook. Today was not build day. That had been the rule yesterday. Tomorrow we build nothing. So naturally I

drove to a hardware store. Not to build. Research. Important distinction. Katniss looked at me.

"Research."

She did not believe me. Blaze didn't either. Echo whistled. Traitors. The hardware store was twenty minutes away. Echo rode in temporary carrier. Blaze settled. Katniss watched road. No drama. At store, I parked in shade. Cool morning. Short stop. Animals secure. Inside: Rubber isolators. Bushings. Washers. Stainless fasteners. Aluminum angle. Powder-coated brackets. Too many options. I took photographs. Not art. Reference.

Read labels. Checked materials. Then remembered Priya's warning. No toxic coatings where Echo could chew. That reduced choices. Good. I found food-grade stainless mesh catalog sheet. Maybe. Too heavy? Maybe. I wrote item numbers. Bought nothing. Victory. Then I bought coffee. Unrelated. Outside, Katniss had moved to passenger seat. Echo was quiet. Blaze asleep. I opened door.

"Nobody panic."

No one had. Good. We drove to a small park. Echo's first ordinary stop as part of group. No trial. No clipboard. No rescue person watching. That felt different. I did normal things. Blaze out first. Water. Walk. Katniss stayed inside while Echo remained secured. Then Katniss out on harness. Short walk. Echo watched through carrier. No interaction.

No ceremony. Back at van, I set up temporary divider. Katniss went to her side. She looked annoyed.

"Twenty minutes."

Blink. Echo came out to secure perch. He stretched. Then immediately chewed the perch.

"Good use."

He climbed. Looked outside. A cyclist passed. Echo leaned forward. Whistle. The cyclist looked around. I pretended not to know him. Echo whistled again. Cyclist waved. Excellent. Katniss sat behind mesh. Watching. No crouch. No launch. No tail twitch. Still management. Blaze lay near bench. Normal. Twenty-three minutes later, Echo returned to carrier for food. Divider down.

Katniss stepped through immediately. She inspected every place Echo had been.

"Quality control."

She rubbed cheek against lower perch stand. Not allowed. I wiped it. This was going to be cleaning forever. Good to know. We drove south. No destination. Echo made noise periodically. Not constant. Sometimes

whistles. Sometimes little chattering sounds. Sometimes one sharp call that made me look for mechanical failure.

“No warning tone.”

Echo did it again.

“You’re going to cause problems.”

Blaze yawned. Katniss ignored all of us. Around noon I stopped at a feed store. This one had bird supplies. I went in with list from Margaret and Priya. Nectar mix. Fruit-safe storage. Cleaning brushes dedicated to bird use. Paper liners. Replacement perch hardware. A clerk asked what kind of bird.

“Rainbow lorikeet.”

She smiled.

“Messy.”

“I’ve heard.”

“No. Messy.”

I looked at cart.

“How much worse?”

She laughed.

“You’re new.”

Apparently. No. I bought extra liners. Back at van, Echo saw bag. He got louder.

“Nobody told you what’s in here.”

He continued.

“Suspicious.”

Blaze sniffed. Katniss sniffed.

“None of this is yours.”

Universal disappointment. We continued. Early afternoon, weather warmed. I watched thermometer more than usual. Van stayed comfortable. Good. Still, I noticed sun on the wall where enclosure would eventually go. That mattered. I pulled over. Looked inside. Direct sun patch. Too much. I took notebook. Need shade panel / reflective exterior barrier / position check across day. Good catch. The design had been reviewed in morning light. Not afternoon.

Important. I took a photo of sun patch. Reference. Then sat outside ten minutes. Cloud passed. Patch disappeared. Not enough. Permanent design had to handle sun, not hope for clouds. I texted Priya. Found direct afternoon sun on proposed wall. Need shade/thermal solution

before build. She replied: Good catch. That's exactly why mockups matter. Then: Could also shift enclosure slightly forward if airflow remains good.

I looked. Maybe. I measured. Six inches forward. Still clears cabinet. Still away from stove. Better. I marked notebook. No drilling. Good. We drove another hour. Echo settled. Then something unexpected. He slept. Not fully. Bird sleep looked different. But quiet. Head tucked slightly. Body relaxed. I looked through mirror. Good. Katniss saw me looking.

"Nothing."

She closed eyes. Blaze already asleep. I drove. The road followed low river plain. Cottonwoods. Open fields. Small farms. One old barn leaned toward collapse. I didn't stop. One field full of horses. Didn't stop. A rusted truck under tree. Almost. Didn't. Then light hit irrigation water beside road. Just a narrow ditch. Nothing special. But clouds reflected perfectly.

I stopped. Camera. Echo stayed secured. Blaze inside. Katniss inside. First frame. Too much grass. Moved. Second. Water became line through field. Clouds upside down. Click. Good. Then wind moved surface. Reflection broke. Keeper. One photograph. Enough. Back at van, Echo was awake. He gave my whistle. I answered. No hesitation this time. That surprised me. We continued.

Late afternoon, I found a campground beside a small grove. No dramatic scenery. Good. Set camp. Echo first? No. Blaze first. Routine. Then Katniss. Routine. Then Echo. New routine. That order mattered. Nobody got replaced by urgency. I set divider. Katniss on one side. Echo out. He climbed secure perch. Then onto my hand. I froze. Not because I was scared. Because he hadn't done that yet.

He stepped from perch to fingers. Then wrist. Light. Warmer than expected. I held still. Echo looked at me. Then climbed higher.

"Don't."

He reached forearm.

"Absolutely not shoulder."

He continued.

"Boundary."

Then shoulder. Of course. Blaze lifted head. Katniss became very interested. I looked at her.

"No."

Her body changed. Not crouch. But focused. Too focused. I stood. Slowly. Moved farther from divider. Echo remained on shoulder. Katniss's eyes followed. That was enough. I returned Echo to perch. No drama. Then shortened out time. Management. Not trust. Good lesson.

I wrote mental note: Katniss calm near caged bird did not equal Katniss calm near moving loose bird. Obvious. Still useful. Divider down only after Echo secured. Katniss immediately investigated. I let her. Supervised. She sniffed perch stand. Then walked away. Good. No punishment. No scolding beyond interruption. She was being cat. Echo was being bird. My job was geometry.

That sentence was irritatingly accurate. Dinner. Echo ate. Blaze ate. Katniss ate. I ate. Then cleaning. Then more cleaning. Feed-store clerk had understated nothing.

"Messy."

Echo whistled.

"Yes."

After dark, partial cover. Echo settled. Katniss took chair. Blaze floor. I opened notebook. Today's notes: Ordinary travel day. Then: Direct afternoon sun hits proposed enclosure wall. Shift forward ~6 in or add thermal/shade barrier. Review before build.

Then: Katniss calm around secured Echo. More focused when Echo loose/on shoulder. Important distinction. Continue physical separation during out time. Then: Echo stepped onto hand/shoulder voluntarily. I looked at that. No adjective. Good. Then: Cleaning estimate was optimistic. Very important. I turned page. Mercer. Nothing new. I almost skipped. Then wrote: Need archive or newspaper access eventually. Not today.

Still alive. Good. Then photograph: Irrigation ditch / cloud reflection. Keeper. I closed notebook. Phone buzzed. Margaret. How was today? I typed: Normal. Messy. Loud. Ate. Slept. Climbed on me. Three dots appeared immediately. He got on your shoulder? I stared. Yes. Briefly. Katniss got too interested so I put him back. Long pause. Then: Good call. Good. Another message.

Diane used to call that his pirate phase. I laughed. Why? Shoulder. Yelling. Stealing things. Fair. I looked at sleeping carrier.

"Pirate."

Soft movement under cover. No whistle. Blaze slept. Katniss slept. The van felt fuller. Not smaller. That was different. I looked at blank wall where enclosure might go. Not built. Not yet. Good. Permanent things deserved more than one good sketch. And one bird deserved more than a convenient solution. Tomorrow we'd keep moving. Maybe build later. Maybe adjust again.

No rush now. Echo was already here.

CHAPTER 45

The Things That Have to Work

Echo discovered spoons before breakfast. Not the same spoon. That would have been too easy. A clean spoon. Freshly washed. Sitting beside the sink. I turned around. He leaned toward it from his perch.

"No."

He leaned farther.

"No."

One foot lifted.

"Absolutely not."

Echo whistled. My bad whistle. Manipulation. Already. Katniss watched from the bench. Blaze watched from the floor. Neither helped. Coffee. Breakfast. Nectar. Fruit. Dog food. Cat food. Cleaning. More cleaning. Feed-store clerk remained correct. Messy. I looked at the proposed enclosure wall. Still blank. Good. Today, however, blank was becoming less useful.

I opened notebook. Measurements. Priya's corrections. Sun-angle note. Vibration isolation. Cleaning tray. Shielding. Perches. Then wrote: Build only what has to work. That seemed right. Not what looked good. Not what felt clever. What had to work.

Echo had to travel comfortably. Katniss had to keep most of her freedom. Blaze had to keep his normal space. I had to be able to clean everything without dismantling half the van. The enclosure had to survive road vibration. Nothing could rattle itself loose. Nothing could become a chewable hazard. No direct afternoon heat. No fumes. No easy cat paw access. No escape.

Simple. I laughed. Katniss looked at me.

"Engineering humor."

She left. Good instinct. I texted Priya. I think I'm ready to move from cardboard to materials. I want one more review of the final location

and dimensions before I drill anything. Reply: That makes sense. I can meet tomorrow morning.

Then: If you want, send updated sketch today and I can mark it up first. Better. I photographed the page. Reference. Not art. Sent. Then Margaret. Building may start after Priya reviews final dimensions. She replied: You sound like a contractor. I have become unpleasant. You were already halfway there. Fair. Echo whistled.

“She’s becoming unreliable.”

Katniss looked over.

“Everyone.”

The day had no reason to stay still. So we moved. South. Of course. Echo rode in the temporary carrier. Still temporary. He settled faster now. No freeze. No long adjustment. Five minutes in, he ate. Blaze slept. Katniss watched traffic. Normal. At twenty minutes, Echo started making soft chatter. Not loud. Not alarmed. Just there. The van sounded different now. Engine. Wind. Cabinets. Dog breathing. Bird noise.

I realized I had stopped hearing the bird noise as interruption. Interesting. I did not write that down. Not yet. We reached a small town around ten. One grocery. One pharmacy. One welding shop. One hardware store. Dangerous. I kept driving. Then saw a farm supply place. Worse. I turned around.

“Research.” Blaze did not move. Katniss did not move. Echo whistled.

“Nobody asked.”

Inside, I found actual stainless hardware in several grades, finishes, and prices. I photographed labels for reference: rubber isolators, neoprene bushings, silicone pads, stainless mesh, food-safe coating information. Too many choices again. A man in work boots and suspenders appeared. “Building something?”

“Maybe.”

“Good answer.”

His name was Wes. I showed him sketch. Not bird details at first. Just enclosure. Vibration. Road use. He looked.

“You’re trying to isolate shock without letting it swing.”

“Yes.”

“Rubber bushings here.”

He pointed.

“Secondary stops here.”

“Yes.”

“Don’t hang it on bungees.”

"Wasn't planning to."

"Good."

"Too much movement."

"Exactly."

I liked Wes. Then he asked: "What's inside?"

"Bird."

He looked at drawing again.

"Expensive bird?"

"Emotionally."

He stared.

"Fair."

He recommended marine-grade stainless fasteners for some mounting points. Not because of water. Because van condensation and cleaning. Good point. I photographed item numbers. Bought nothing. Victory again. Almost. Then I bought four rubber isolation mounts. Small. Cheap. Not enough to build enclosure. Enough to test compression. That felt acceptable. Back at van, I squeezed one between fingers.

Too stiff. Another. Better. I put them away. No drilling. Good. We stopped at a town park. Echo remained in carrier while Blaze and Katniss got their walk. Then divider. Echo out. He climbed perch. Katniss watched. Less focused than yesterday. Still watched. Good. Echo moved to my hand. This time I expected it. Then wrist. Then forearm.

I stopped him before shoulder.

"Pirate phase has limits."

Echo whistled. Katniss's eyes followed. Still enough focus that shoulder was not worth it. Back to perch. Good. No disappointment. That mattered. Echo stayed out another fifteen minutes. Then voluntarily went back toward carrier when I refreshed food. Good. Divider down. Katniss reclaimed space. No one lost a life. That was the system. We drove. Around noon, Priya texted back annotated sketch.

Three changes. 1. Move enclosure another 4 inches forward from heat/sun zone. 2. Increase lower solid shield height. 3. Add exterior latch guard so cat can't manipulate latch. Excellent. I changed drawing. Then: Would you consider a removable shade panel outside the enclosure wall? I thought. Yes. Not permanent insulation that trapped heat. A removable reflective panel with air gap.

I drew. Echo watched from carrier.

"You're expensive."

He ate. Blaze slept. Katniss moved into a sun patch. Everyone contributed differently. Afternoon road left farms and entered low rocky

country. More open sky. Less shade. Temperature climbed. I watched thermometer. Van stayed okay. Echo stayed okay. Still, I stopped more often. Short breaks. Ventilation. Water. Nothing dramatic. Good. At one turnout, a long freight train moved through valley below.

I almost photographed it. Too far. Too ordinary. Then sunlight hit only one section of train. Silver cars flashing. Rest in shadow. I took camera. First frame. Too wide. Second. Train small. Then I used longer lens. Compressed valley. Bright cars cutting through dark land. Click. Good. Waited. Another patch of light. Gone. Keeper. No history. No Mercer. Just timing.

We continued. Around three, Margaret called. I pulled over.

"How's pirate?"

I looked at Echo.

"Contained."

"That's not an answer."

"He ate. Slept. Climbed on me. Didn't reach shoulder."

"Growth."

"Management."

She laughed.

"How's Katniss?"

"Still a cat."

"That's probably the harder variable."

I let it pass.

"Did Priya approve build?"

"Final review tomorrow."

"Are you nervous?"

"No."

Echo whistled. Margaret heard.

"He's calling you a liar."

"Unreliable witness."

Then she asked: "Do you want me there?" I thought.

"Yes."

That surprised both of us. Pause.

"Okay."

I added: "You know his routines better than I do. If something about placement feels wrong, I'd rather know before holes exist." Margaret quiet. Then: "Okay." Different tone. Good. We drove another hour. Found campground under cottonwoods. Shade. Good. Set up. Blaze

first. Katniss second. Echo third. Routine. I liked that word more now. Divider. Echo out. He climbed perch. Then my hand.

Stayed there. No shoulder attempt. Good. Katniss watched but not intensely. Better. I moved slowly around van with Echo on hand. Not far. Not dramatic. He adjusted grip with motion. Interesting. I sat. Echo climbed wrist. Stopped. Then chewed jacket cuff.

"That is clothing."

Chew.

"Important clothing."

Chew. I returned him to perch. No argument. Blaze watched entire process. Then sighed. Professional review. After twenty minutes, Echo back in carrier. Divider down. Katniss jumped onto bench. Normal. Good. Dinner. Cleaning. More cleaning. I found fruit pulp on a cabinet I had not seen Echo near. Impossible. I stared.

"How?"

Echo whistled.

"Not evidence."

After dark, I opened the nineteenth-century photography book. Mercer. I had avoided it for two days. Not forgotten. Just busy. I read about itinerant photographers. Survey teams. Railroad photographers. Expedition documentation. Field assistants. Then something caught me.

Commercial photographers sometimes traveled routes specifically to document infrastructure, settlements, land, and changes. Not portraits. Not families. Places. Connections. Roads. Crossings. I stopped. Not proof. But closer to a reason. I wrote: Possible category: commercial / survey / infrastructure documentation. Then: Search regional newspapers, railroad/survey records, photography directories, not only archives. Good. Then I remembered the exhibit. The Bell negatives. Roads / river / timber.

Not Mercer necessarily. Still. I wrote: Howard may know whether Bell collection came from surveyor/engineer family. Ask eventually. There. Thread alive. I closed book. Phone buzzed. Margaret. He's okay? I looked at carrier. Echo asleep. Asleep. Ate well. Normal day. Then: Tomorrow 9? Yes. I put phone down. Next morning, Priya arrived at nine. Margaret at eight fifty-two. Of course.

No one mentioned it. Echo was inside carrier. Awake. Margaret greeted him. Three notes. He answered. Then my bad whistle. I answered. Priya looked at me.

"Strong boundaries?"

"Historical concept."

She smiled. We rebuilt cardboard mock-up. Updated location. Four inches forward. Higher lower shield. Latch guard. External shade panel concept. Priya climbed in. Measured. Margaret stood behind her. Katniss sat passenger seat. Blaze outside. Priya checked sun direction. Ventilation. Access. Clearance. Cleaning tray route. Then: “Show me how you remove tray.” I pretended. Hit cabinet corner. Bad.

“Again.”

I shifted design. Two inches. Better.

“That’s why cardboard.” Margaret said.

“Exactly.”

We tested. Tray clears. Door clears. Cabinet clears. Head clears. Katniss walked beneath. No loss of route. Good. Priya pointed to perch.

“Lower another inch.”

I changed. Then latch.

“Two-step.”

I looked at her.

“Latch plus guard.”

“Yes.”

“Cat proof?”

“No such phrase.”

Excellent.

“Cat-resistant.”

Better. She looked at Katniss. Katniss looked away. Priya inspected isolation mount sample.

“This one?”

“Maybe.”

She compressed.

“Too stiff.”

“Agreed.”

Second.

“Closer.”

We discussed durometer. Travel load. Movement limits. Margaret looked between us.

“I have no idea what you’re saying.”

“Good.”

“Why good?”

“Means we’re discussing something boring.”

She laughed. Boring was good. After forty minutes, Priya stepped back.

"I'd be comfortable with this design if final materials are bird-safe and mounts are properly rated."

There it was. Not dramatic. Excellent. I looked at Margaret. She looked at enclosure outline.

"Would Diane like it?"

I didn't answer. Not mine. Margaret did.

"She'd complain about color."

Good. Then: "And then she'd put toys everywhere." Echo whistled. Margaret smiled.

"Yes. Exactly."

Priya gathered notes.

"So now you can build."

I looked at blank wall.

"Today?"

"If you want."

I didn't. Not yet. Interesting. Margaret noticed.

"You've been thinking about this for days."

"Yes."

"And now you don't want to start?"

"I want to drive."

She smiled.

"That sounds more like you."

Good. So we didn't build. We drove. Margaret went home. Priya went wherever clipboard people go. Echo came with us. South. The permanent enclosure would happen. Soon. But not because today was finally allowed. Because eventually the right materials, right place, and right time would meet. Until then, temporary still meant temporary. Twenty miles later, Echo whistled. My bad whistle.

I answered. Blaze slept. Katniss watched road. The van carried four. No one had taken it over. That mattered more than the cage.

CHAPTER 46

Built for the Road

We did not build the enclosure the next morning. Good. We drove. Also good. Echo had begun recognizing the sound of packing. Not because the van changed. Because I did. Coffee faster. Water first. Food checked. Camera bag closed. Notebook away. He watched all of it. Then: Bad whistle.

“Yes.”

Blaze stretched. Katniss took the passenger seat. Four. Still strange. Less strange. The temporary carrier remained secured. Useful. Temporary. I had started to dislike seeing it. Not because it was unsafe. Because it looked like a solution. It wasn’t. We drove south through open country. Long road. Low wind. Good weather. Echo ate early. Then watched. Then made quiet noises.

Katniss watched him less than yesterday. That mattered. Not trust. Never trust. Just familiarity. Blaze slept. Professional. An hour later, I stopped at a rest area. Not scenic. Not historic. Perfect. Blaze out. Katniss out. Echo stayed secured. Routine. I walked the perimeter. Then returned. A man stood beside the Volkswagen. Older. Work jacket. Hands in pockets. He looked at van. Then at me.

“Yours?”

“Yes.”

“Runs?”

“Currently.”

He laughed.

“Had one in seventy-eight.”

“Good year?”

“For the van?”

“Your life.”

He thought.

“No.”

Fair. He walked around rear.

“Don’t repaint it.”

I stared.

“There really is a committee.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

He left. Good meeting. Back inside, Echo whistled.

“Yes. Everyone has opinions.”

Katniss jumped onto bench. We continued. Around ten, the road crossed a broad valley. Rail line. Old grain elevators. Small town. I stopped for fuel. The station had a hardware aisle. Of course. I did not go down it. Growth. I bought coffee. Less growth.

At the edge of town, I saw a sign: CUSTOM FABRICATION WELDING TRAILER REPAIR I drove past. Then slowed. Then turned around.

“Research.”

Nobody reacted. Good. The shop sat behind chain-link fence. Open bay. Metal racks. Sparks somewhere inside. I went in. A woman wearing safety glasses looked up from a bench. Mid-forties maybe. Dark braid. Work gloves.

“Can I help you?”

“Possibly.”

“That’s not confident.”

“It’s a design.”

“That’s usually worse.”

Good. Her name was Elena. Different Elena. Names recycled. I showed her sketch. She looked longer than Wes had.

“Mobile?”

“Van.”

“Weight?”

“Not much.”

“Load?”

“Bird enclosure.”

She looked at me.

“Okay.”

No reaction. Excellent. I explained vibration problem. Rigid support frame. Isolation mounts. Limited movement. Secondary restraint. She pointed at drawing.

“You’re overcomplicating this part.”

Good.

“How?”

“You’re thinking suspension.”

“Not really.”

“You are.”

I looked. She was right. Annoying. She took pencil.

“Frame rigid to van.”

“Yes.”

“Small elastomer isolators between frame and enclosure.”

“Yes.”

“Travel stops here and here.”

She marked.

“So the cage can move maybe an eighth inch under shock, not swing.”

Better.

“Secondary strap?”

“Fine. Redundant.”

“Exactly.”

She pointed to bracket location.

“Don’t use thin angle here. It’ll fatigue.”

“What instead?”

“Box section or formed channel.”

I wrote. Then: “And build tray supports independently of enclosure.”

“Why?”

“Because you’ll remove tray constantly. You don’t want cleaning wear transferred into structural mount.”

Good. I liked Elena. I asked what she would use. She walked me through stock. Aluminum. Stainless. Different thicknesses. Not all bird-safe by default. Some coatings bad. Some edges bad. Some surfaces impossible to clean well. She said: “If this is for an animal, make every edge something you’d be willing to run your hand across.” Good rule.

I wrote it. Then she looked at van through bay door.

“That?”

“Yes.”

She walked outside. No invitation needed apparently. She looked inside. Echo watched her.

“Pretty bird.”

“Messy bird.”

She nodded.

"All birds are."

Experience? Maybe. She looked at proposed wall. Measured.

"You're tight."

"I know."

"But workable."

Good. She pointed to roof rib.

"Mount frame to structure, not panel."

"Yes."

"Use backing plate where needed."

"Yes."

"And don't make it so permanent you can't remove it without destroying van."

That stopped me.

"What?"

"Things change."

Simple.

"Bird changes. Van changes. You change."

I looked at blank wall. Removable. Of course. Permanent enough to be safe. Not permanent enough to become architecture forever. I wrote: Bolted modular frame. Removable without cutting van. That was better. Elena gave me card.

"If you want, bring final dimensions. We can cut frame pieces and deburr everything."

"How much?"

"Depends."

Dangerous answer.

"Could I assemble it?"

"Yes."

"Good."

She looked at me.

"You don't like paying people?"

"I like knowing what holds my bird."

I heard sentence after saying it. My bird. I looked at Echo. He whistled. Elena smiled.

"Apparently."

No. I let it go. We left. That phrase stayed. My bird. Not owned. Not exactly. Responsibility. Maybe. Road again. I didn't think about it. Much. Around noon, I found a public park beside river. Routine. Blaze first. Katniss second. Echo third. The order felt settled now. Divider up. Echo out. He climbed perch. Then hand. Katniss watched. Less intensity. Still enough.

I moved farther from divider. Echo stayed on hand. Then forearm. He tried shoulder. I blocked gently.

"Not today, pirate."

Echo gave three notes. I answered. Better than before. Still bad. He repeated. Margaret would have laughed. I took phone. Not camera. Short video. Not artistic. Just proof. Echo on hand. Blaze lying behind me. Katniss visible beyond divider. I sent it to Margaret. Routine. Her reply: He looks good. Then: You sound terrible. I stared. Whistle improving.

No. Cruel. Echo returned to perch. Twenty minutes. Then carrier. Divider down. Katniss reclaimed van. Good. We ate lunch. I opened notebook. Added Elena's notes. Then wrote: Modular. Removable. Structural frame stays independent from enclosure. Then: Every edge safe enough to run hand over. That one got underlined.

The more I worked on design, the less it looked like bird cage. More like equipment. That was good. A travel enclosure. Not decoration. Not prison. Equipment. We drove again. Clouds thickened. Temperature dropped. Good. Echo got louder. Maybe weather. Maybe boredom. Maybe bird. Hard to know. I started learning that not every noise required interpretation. Useful skill.

At two, he yelled. I checked mirror. Normal. He yelled again.

"Not everything is emergency."

Blaze's ear moved. Katniss slept. Excellent examples. Another hour. Small town. Library. I almost stopped. Mercer. Then I looked at time. No. Not today. That felt okay. The thread could wait without disappearing. I wrote town name in notebook at next stop. Library. Return if route allows. Good. No guilt. Late afternoon, rain began. Light. Then steady. Road darkened. Fields softened.

I saw something worth stopping for. A line of telephone poles running through rain. One old barn in distance. Road curving away. I pulled over. Camera. First frame. Rain spots on lens. Bad. Wiped. Second. Too much road. Moved. Third. Poles leading into gray. Barn barely visible. Click. Good. Then a car came through. Headlights on. I waited until it entered curve.

Click. Better. Keeper. Rain increased. Back inside. Echo was quiet. Maybe rain. Maybe tired. No need to know. We found campground before dark. Covered site enough. Trees. Wet ground. Set camp. Routine.

Echo out briefly. Less than usual because rain cooled fast. Katniss didn't care for wet. Good. Blaze did. Of course. He came back damp. The van smelled like dog.

Echo reacted by making one sharp sound.

"Correct."

Katniss looked offended.

"Also correct."

Dinner. Cleaning. More cleaning. I found nectar spray on window. How? Physics had failed. I wiped. After dark, partial cover. Echo settled. Rain tapped roof. I opened notebook. Today's notes: Elena — fabrication shop. Then all design changes. Rigid modular frame to structural points. Isolation only between frame/enclosure. Limited travel. No swinging. Separate tray supports. Removable enclosure/frame without cutting van apart. Safe edges.

Then: I said "my bird." I stared. Crossed nothing out. Next: Margaret video: Echo on hand. Not photo. Still mattered. Then photograph: Rain road / telephone poles / car entering curve. Keeper. Mercer. I turned page. Nothing new. Then remembered something. Photography equipment. Heavy. Fragile. Portable darkrooms. Routes. And now Elena's words: Things change.

I wrote: Mercer may have needed support network, not just equipment. Look for recurring towns / supply routes / transport links in photo locations. That felt useful. Then: Maybe the routes matter because the photographer had to follow them, not because they were the subject. I stopped. Different possibility. Important. Maybe I'd been assuming Mercer photographed routes because routes mattered.

Maybe Mercer photographed what was accessible because nineteenth-century equipment made accessibility the whole problem. That could change everything. Not solve. Complicate. Good. I closed notebook. Echo moved under cover. Blaze slept. Katniss took chair. Rain continued. I looked at blank wall. Enclosure would be built soon. Not tomorrow necessarily. But soon. That no longer felt like changing van for Echo.

It felt like adding one more piece of equipment for a traveler who was already here. Different. Better.

CHAPTER 47

The First Hole

The first hole was less dramatic than expected. No thunder. No bird scream. No structural collapse. Just a drill. Metal. And me standing there longer than necessary. Elena looked at me. “You planning to use that?”

“Eventually.”

She looked at drill. Then at wall. Then at me.

“You’ve measured it four times.”

“Five.”

“That doesn’t improve this.”

“Statistically it might.”

“No.”

Good. Echo watched from his temporary carrier. Katniss watched Echo. Blaze watched nobody. Normal morning. Mostly. We had returned to Elena’s fabrication shop just after eight. Not because I had suddenly become enthusiastic about construction. Because temporary things had begun collecting permanence around them. Carrier. Divider. Supply bin. Cleaning brushes. Extra towels. Nectar containers.

If Echo was staying, the van needed to stop looking like we had kidnapped a bird during a camping trip. Elena had already cut the frame pieces. Aluminum box section. Rounded edges. Deburred. Nothing sharp. Nothing painted where Echo could reach. She had also fabricated the tray support separately. Her idea. Still good.

The enclosure itself came from an avian-safe stainless assembly ordered through a supplier Priya had recommended. Not custom enough to be ridiculous. Custom enough to fit. The expensive part was not the metal. It was everything else. I had learned that birds came with an invisible financial ecosystem. Echo whistled.

“Yes. You.”

Elena looked at him. “He’s colorful.”

“That’s how they get you.”

She laughed. Priya had reviewed dimensions and material list the night before. No objections. One reminder: Check every final edge, latch and gap after installation. Reasonable. Margaret had texted: Take pictures. I had replied: Of the cage? Of you actually drilling into the van. I want proof. Unreliable. I did not send her anything yet.

The frame mounting points were structural, not panel. Elena had confirmed it. So had I. Still, the van had survived decades without this hole, and I felt personally responsible for ending that streak. Elena folded arms.

"Do you want me to do it?"

"No."

"Then drill."

I did. Metal bit. Clean. Small. Nothing exploded. Echo whistled.

"Thank you."

Second hole. Easier. Third. By fourth I had become reckless. Almost efficient. Frame went in with backing plates where needed. Stainless hardware. Locking nuts. Rubber isolation points between structural frame and enclosure mount. Not suspension. Not bungees. Not swing. Just enough compliance to absorb harsh vibration. Elena tightened one fastener. Then stopped.

"Feel."

I pulled enclosure mount. Tiny movement. Barely.

"That's enough."

"Doesn't feel like much."

"That's the point."

She pushed. Released.

"No bounce."

Good. Echo needed vibration isolation. Not amusement park engineering. The enclosure went onto frame. Slowly. We checked clearance. Door. Cabinet. Tray. Roof. Window. The removable shade panel sat outside wall with air gap. Not touching enclosure. Not trapping heat. Temperature sensor mounted nearby where Echo couldn't eat it. Important. Katniss entered van. Of course. She walked directly beneath enclosure. Looked up.

Echo looked down. Nobody moved. I watched Katniss. Interested. Not hunting. Still a cat. She stood on hind legs.

"No."

Front paws touched wall beneath solid shield. Still couldn't reach bars. Good. She stretched farther. Still couldn't. Better. Elena watched.

"That's your test?"

"One of them."

Katniss dropped. Walked away.

"Passed?"

"Today."

Important distinction. Blaze came in. He sniffed floor. Sniffed lower wall. Looked at Echo. Echo looked at him. Then Blaze lay down. Highest possible endorsement. We installed lower solid shield higher than original design. Enough that a paw from below couldn't reach through. Side shield where Katniss could approach from bench. Two-step latch with guard. I opened it. Closed it. Opened it. Closed it.

Elena watched.

"You trust yourself?"

"No."

"Good answer."

I tested latch twenty times. Katniss tested it once. She failed. Good. Then tray. Slide out. Clear cabinet. Remove. Replace. No collision. Excellent. Then perches. Lower than original. Different diameters. Stable. Staggered so sudden braking wouldn't send Echo down length of enclosure. Food and water positions. Not beneath perches. Learned that quickly. Bird ownership contained lessons that should not require experience. Yet somehow did.

I ran hand along every edge. Elena's rule. If I wouldn't run hand over it, Echo shouldn't live beside it. Nothing caught. One corner felt rough. Elena filed it. Again. Smooth. Good. Then came the part I had avoided thinking about. Moving Echo in. The enclosure had been abstract until now. Metal. Measurements. Hardware. Echo made it real.

Priya had told me not to force transfer. Carrier door aligned with enclosure opening. Both secured. No open van door. Katniss physically separated. Blaze restrained outside. Good. I opened carrier. Echo stayed inside. Of course. Elena looked at me.

"Now what?"

"We wait."

"How long?"

"Bird."

She nodded like this explained time. It did. Echo climbed carrier perch. Looked at new enclosure. Then at me.

"No pressure."

He chewed carrier bar. Five minutes. Nothing. Ten. Elena went back to work. Good. I sat. Echo moved toward carrier opening. Stopped. Looked. Then back. Fine. I drank coffee. At twelve minutes, he stepped through.

One foot. Then other. Into new enclosure. No ceremony. He climbed first perch. Looked around. Then immediately tried to dismantle the latch guard from inside.

"Of course."

I watched. He couldn't reach mechanism. Good. He moved to second perch. Climbed side. Touched shield. Chewed perch. Then food. Better. I texted Priya. In enclosure. Exploring. Eating. No obvious problems. Then Margaret. He's in. First action was attempted sabotage. Her reply arrived instantly. Diane would be proud. I smiled. Echo gave three notes. I answered. Still bad. Less bad.

That was unfortunate. We left him parked for another forty minutes. Van stationary. Doors open where safe. Temperature good. Katniss remained separated during transfer. After Echo had settled securely inside, I removed temporary divider. Katniss entered. She noticed enclosure immediately. Walked beneath. Sat. Looked up. Echo climbed lower. I moved between them.

"Not invitation."

Katniss looked at me. Then Echo. Then window. Good. She jumped onto bench. Side shield blocked direct access. She stretched nose toward it. Couldn't reach bird. Echo watched. Then returned to food. Good. Still management. But normal management. That was what we had wanted. The divider folded flat again. Stored. Most of van returned to everyone. Good. Elena leaned into doorway.

"Looks like it belongs there."

I looked. She was right. That bothered me slightly. Not because it looked wrong. Because it didn't. The frame followed existing lines. Didn't dominate. Didn't block windows. Didn't steal bench. Didn't steal floor. One more piece of equipment. Exactly. I paid Elena. More than I wanted. Less than work deserved. She handed me remaining hardware.

"Keep spares."

"Why?"

"Because the one bolt you need will never be sold in the town where it fails."

Wisdom. I put them in labeled bag. Not loose. Spoon lesson. Before leaving, Elena said: "Drive ten minutes. Come back."

"Test?"

"Listen."

"For what?"

"Anything you didn't hear while parked."

Good. We drove. Echo inside enclosure. Blaze settled. Katniss passenger seat. First bump. Nothing. Second. Small vibration through frame. No rattle. No swing. Echo adjusted feet. Fine. Five minutes. He moved perch. Seven. A truck passed. He watched. No alarm. Ten. I turned around. Back at shop, Elena checked fasteners. Nothing shifted. Tray stayed. Latch stayed. Isolation mounts seated.

"Drive fifty miles. Check again."

"Then?"

"Check after first rough road. Then periodically."

Good. Maintenance. Not faith. We left for real. South. The temporary carrier was empty. That felt enormous. I folded it. Stored it. Not discarded. Emergency equipment. Vet visits. Backup. Temporary had ended without becoming useless. Good. The van sounded almost the same. Engine. Wind. Cabinet. Dog breathing. Bird noise. No enclosure rattle. Excellent. At the first rest area, I checked every fastener.

Still tight. Echo moved normally. Ate. Drank. Katniss ignored him for nearly six minutes. Personal record. Then watched. Fine. Blaze came back from walk. Looked up. Echo gave loud call. Blaze blinked. Then drank water. Professional. I texted Margaret a photograph. Not art. Just enclosure. Echo inside. Permanent home installed. Travel test good. She replied: It looks better than I pictured.

Then: Diane would've filled every empty inch with toys. I looked at enclosure. There was room. Not too much. I wrote: Gradual. She replied: Yes. Good. We continued. The road crossed into another small town. Lunch. Fuel. Walk. Then I saw library. The one from yesterday. I had written the town name down. Good. I almost kept driving.

Then looked at Echo. New enclosure. Settled. Temperature good. Animals safe. Cool day. No construction waiting. No appointment. No reason not to. I parked beneath shade. Short stop. The library was small. Brick. One floor. Inside, two computers. Three people. A librarian who looked busy enough not to care about skeleton. Good. I asked about historical newspapers. She pointed to computer. "State archive has digitized papers. Some local issues too."

"Searchable?"

"Mostly."

Dangerous word. I sat. Mercer. Search: "E. Mercer" Too many. Mercer County. Mercer Street. Mercer family. E. Mercer selling a horse. E. Mercer attending church. No. Added: photograph Fewer. Nothing useful. Added: photographer One result. I stopped. Not because it was clearly right. Because it was possible. A newspaper. Small notice. Poor scan. I enlarged. The text was damaged.

Enough remained. Something about a public display of photographic views. Road work. River country. Timber. Then: ...views by E. Mercer... I stared. No first name. No profession. No biography. But there it was. E. Mercer. Not written on back of photograph. Not postcard. Not my interpretation. Printed in a newspaper in 1891. I read the notice again. The wording was incomplete. Parts unreadable.

I did not fill gaps. Important. I copied exact visible text into notebook.

"... photographic views ... roads and river country ... E. Mercer ..."

Then newspaper name. Date. Page. Column. My hands felt strange. Bone hands. Still. I searched surrounding issues. Nothing. Changed terms. Mercer views Another result. Two months later. Short mention. A local business had several "views" for sale or display. Again E. Mercer. No first name. But another phrase survived clearly: "recent improvements and crossings" I sat back. Crossings.

There it was again. Not proof of motive. But stronger. Mercer had apparently been producing photographs people understood as views of roads, river country, improvements, crossings. Not random photographs. I wrote carefully. Mercer was known publicly enough for newspaper to name the photographs. Then: At least some work described as roads / river country / improvements / crossings.

Then: Could be commercial documentation. Could be commissioned. Could still be personal work sold afterward. Do not overstate. Good. I searched first name. Nothing. Initial only. I tried combinations. Engineer. Surveyor. Railroad. Photographer. Expedition. No useful result. Fine. One clue. Enough. Then I thought of the equipment book. Heavy camera. Glass plates. Travel. Support. I searched newspaper for Mercer + wagon. Nothing. Mercer + survey. Too many unrelated results.

Mercer + river. Noise. Stop. I knew this problem. Wanting an answer made everything look useful. I closed search. Printed the two newspaper pages. Paper. Again. I liked paper. The librarian charged twenty cents. Most useful forty cents I'd spent in a while. Outside, Blaze greeted me normally. Katniss remained passenger seat. Echo climbed enclosure side. I held up pages.

"Mercer."

No one cared. Good. I sat in driver's seat. Read them once more. Not revelation. Not identity. Not answer. But proof of presence. E. Mercer had existed outside the photographs. That mattered. For a long time, Mercer had been a name attached to images. Now, briefly, Mercer had occupied newspaper ink. Different. I put papers in notebook. Then checked enclosure fasteners.

Still tight. Good. We drove. Afternoon became overcast. No dramatic light. I didn't mind. There was enough today. At a river pullout, I stopped

for routine. Blaze walked. Katniss walked. Echo remained secure. Then divider. Echo out. The permanent enclosure door aligned better with perch setup than carrier had. Good. He stepped to hand. Then wrist. I let him climb shoulder.

Katniss physically separated. Blaze at designated place. Safe enough. Echo sat beside my hat. Pirate. I looked at river.

"You've won."

He pulled at hat brim.

"No."

He pulled harder.

"Temporary victory."

He made three notes. I answered. Better. Still not good. Echo then made my bad whistle. Apparently both traditions survived. We stayed fifteen minutes. Back into enclosure voluntarily when food appeared. Good. Divider down. Katniss returned to van. Nothing dramatic. Routine. I liked that. Late afternoon, the road climbed. Clouds sat low over ridges. A break opened. Not much. Enough.

Light reached one hillside while everything else stayed gray. I pulled over. Camera. First frame. Too wide. Second. Better. Then a line of trees on ridge disappeared into cloud. Light moved. Click. Gone. Keeper. One. Enough. Camp that night was quiet. No construction. No appointments. No temporary carrier taking floor space. The van felt different. Not larger. But less improvised.

Echo's enclosure sat where cardboard had been. Katniss still had bench. Blaze still had floor. I still had head. Success. Mostly. Echo threw fruit onto tray. Then somehow onto floor.

"Physics."

He whistled. I cleaned. Dinner. Partial cover. Echo settled. Then notebook. First: Permanent travel enclosure installed. Details. Fasteners. Mounts. Clearance. Temperature. Test drive. No rattle. No excessive movement. Then: Carrier retained as emergency / vet transport. Good. Then Mercer. I unfolded newspaper copies. Wrote: 1891 newspaper references photographic views by E. Mercer. Then copied only what was visible. roads river country recent improvements crossings

I stared at words. Those were not my guesses anymore. At least not entirely. Something had shifted. Mercer had been looking at the same things I thought Mercer had been looking at. Maybe. Careful. I wrote: This supports route/infrastructure hypothesis. Does not explain why. Then: Find original newspaper page / archive source later. Then: Who commissioned or sold the views?

Good. Last: If photographs were sold, there may be advertisements, invoices, catalogs, or surviving mounts with studio information. There. Direction. Then today's photograph: Ridge entering cloud / brief light. Keeper. I closed notebook. Inside enclosure, Echo shifted. Katniss slept. Blaze slept. I looked at blank space where temporary carrier had been. Nothing there. Good. Something permanent had been added today. But almost nothing had been taken away.

That had been the goal. I looked at newspaper folded inside notebook. Mercer had become slightly more real too. One frame. One line of print. One hole in old metal. Small things. Enough to change what came next.

CHAPTER 48

The Roads Mercer Could Reach

The enclosure rattled once. Just once. I heard it immediately. Of course I did. Blaze did not. Katniss did not. Echo definitely did. One small metallic tick from the rear. I slowed. Another bump. Nothing. Another. Nothing. I pulled over anyway.

“Maintenance.” Echo whistled.

“No commentary.”

The enclosure looked fine. Fasteners tight. Tray seated. Latch secure. Isolation mounts intact. Then I found it. One spare washer. Loose in the hardware bag. Not the enclosure. I stared at washer.

“Spoon’s cousin.”

Blaze looked up. I put washer in a zip bag. Labeled it. Good. We continued. Morning road ran through open country. Low hills. Fields. Occasional timber. Echo had adapted to the enclosure quickly. Not perfectly. Not magically. Quickly. He moved between perches. Ate. Watched. Occasionally yelled at passing trucks. Diane had been right about that. Katniss spent less time staring at him. That was good.

Still enough. Blaze treated all of it as background. Also good. At the next town, I stopped for coffee. A small diner. Cool day. Animals secure. Short stop. Inside smelled like toast and fryer oil. The waitress looked at me. Then through window.

“That’s a bird?”

“Yes.”

“In the van?”

“Also yes.”

She nodded. No follow-up. Excellent. I got coffee to go. At the counter, a folded local paper sat beside register. Front page: School board. County fair. Road closure. Nothing interesting. I almost left. Then remembered Mercer. Newspapers. Routes. Accessibility. I looked at paper again. Not

because of current news. Because old newspapers had finally given me something.

I asked: “Library nearby?” The waitress pointed. “Two blocks.” Dangerous. I walked back to van. Echo whistled.

“Short.”

Katniss looked at library direction.

“Don’t encourage me.”

Blaze remained innocent. The library was slightly larger than yesterday’s. Two floors. Old brick addition attached to newer building. Animals secure. Cool. Shade. I went in. Historical newspapers again. This time I wasn’t searching Mercer first. I opened notebook. Read last note: Mercer may have needed support network, not just equipment. Look for recurring towns / supply routes / transport links in photo locations.

Good. I searched the names of places associated with the photographs I knew. Not exact locations for all of them. Some uncertain. Some broad. Olympic Peninsula. River crossings. Old roads. Settlements. Timber. Too much. Then I searched references around the 1891 notice. Businesses. Display locations. Road improvements. A pattern began slowly. Not Mercer. Places.

The newspaper mention had appeared in a town with river access. Another notice in a settlement connected by wagon road. The old postcard had come from a shop near a transport corridor. Nothing conclusive. But all reachable. That sounded obvious. Then I remembered the equipment. Glass plates. Tripod. Chemicals. Maybe wagon. Maybe assistant. Reachable mattered.

I wrote: Maybe Mercer isn’t choosing roads as subject. Maybe roads define where Mercer can work. Then below: Test this against photos where road/crossing is NOT central. Good. Search existing descriptions. One Mercer image: settlement edge. People small. Structures larger. Road visible. Another: timber operation. Again access route visible. River crossing obviously. Could still be documentary intent. Could still be accessibility. Could be both.

I needed counterexample. If every Mercer photograph had some obvious route or infrastructure, that told me something. If one didn’t, maybe less. I searched old catalog references. Nothing. Then I found a digitized auction notice from 1892. Not Mercer directly. A general list of photographic views for sale. Roads. Falls. Settlements. Logging camps. Rail work. Photography of place was normal enough to sell.

Good. That weakened one assumption. Mercer might not be unique in photographing routes. I wrote: Important: route-focused images may reflect commercial market, not personal obsession. That felt useful. Mystery got smaller. Better. Then I searched E. Mercer photographer

with date range. Another hit. Tiny classified notice. Damaged. Enough to read: E. Mercer will be in ... for several days ... photographic work ...

Location unreadable. I stared. That was different. Not just photographs being displayed. A person moving. Working. I enlarged. The middle was gone. Could not recover. Visible fragments: E. Mercer several days photographic work Maybe: orders received Not clear enough. I did not write it as fact.

Only: 1890 classified suggests Mercer traveled for photographic work. Exact wording/location partly illegible. There. Now Mercer had movement. Not identity. Not gender. Not home. But movement. That mattered. I searched surrounding issues. One week earlier. Nothing. One week later. Nothing. Fine. Then a thought. If Mercer traveled for work, local lodging records? Business directories? Hotel registers? Too much.

I stopped. Good. Print. Twenty cents. Again. I left library with two pages. Outside, the van looked unchanged. That was becoming reassuring. Echo climbed enclosure side when I opened door.

"Mercer."

Bad whistle.

"Different problem."

We walked. Blaze first. Katniss second. Echo stayed secure. Routine. Then road. South. The highway followed railroad for thirty miles. I noticed everything. Stations. Sidings. Old depots. Service roads. Mercer had infected my vision. Not every road mattered. Not every track. Not every crossing. Still. I started seeing transportation as constraint instead of subject. That changed things. Around noon, I stopped near an old rail bridge.

Public turnout. Safe. The bridge wasn't ancient enough for Mercer. Still old. I took camera. Not because of Mercer. Because geometry was good. Steel truss. River. Road below. First frame. Too literal. Second from lower angle. Better. Then a truck crossed distant road behind bridge. Click. Good. Keeper. I checked. No people. No story. Just lines. Fine. Back at van, Echo watched me.

"You don't need to understand."

Whistle. Good. Afternoon warmed. Shade panel worked. Temperature stayed stable. I checked anyway. Then checked enclosure mounts. Still good. That routine would continue. At a rest area, I took Echo out behind divider. Katniss separated. Blaze positioned. Echo stepped to hand. Then shoulder. I allowed it. Pirate phase. He touched hat brim.

"No."

He stopped. Good. Then three notes. I answered. Better. He tilted head. Maybe offended. Then bad whistle. Definitely offended. I laughed. Katniss watched. Less intense. Still watched. I moved Echo back to perch before she got too interested. No drama. Good. This was becoming ordinary. That was the goal. Later, we stopped at a produce stand. Peaches again.

No. I bought apples. Echo got appropriate fruit later. Not random. The woman at stand noticed enclosure through open door.

"Parrot?"

"Lorikeet."

"Talk?"

"Mostly complains."

She laughed.

"Like my husband."

Universal biology. We continued. Late afternoon clouds built. Not storm. Just layered. The road crossed a broad floodplain. Old wooden fence. Wet ground. A low abandoned bridge parallel to current one. I slowed. That looked Mercer. I hated that thought. Pulled over. Camera. The old bridge carried nothing now. New bridge carried everything. I framed both. First: too obvious.

Second: old bridge foreground. New road behind. Better. Then I waited. A single car crossed new bridge. Click. Keeper. I looked at image. This one absolutely looked like something Mercer might have taken. That bothered me. Not because it was bad. Because I didn't know if I had chosen it or been taught to choose it by the mystery.

Interesting. I wrote mental note. Maybe influence mattered too. At camp, I wrote it down. Am I starting to photograph like Mercer because I'm studying Mercer? Then: Or did Mercer interest me because we already notice some of the same things? That was worse. Good. Dinner. Echo ate. Blaze ate. Katniss ate. Cleaning. Less disastrous today. Progress. After dark, I opened the new newspaper print.

E. Mercer ... several days ... photographic work ... I stared. Movement. Traveling photographer? Commercial? Commissioned? Possibly. Then I pulled out earlier newspaper references. Roads. River country. Improvements. Crossings. Maybe those weren't subjects chosen from obsession. Maybe those were jobs. Someone wanted documentation. A town wanted progress recorded. A business wanted views to sell. An engineer wanted evidence. A newspaper wanted images.

Mercer might have been working. That felt almost embarrassingly obvious. I wrote: Don't romanticize the mystery. People worked. Good. Then: Find who paid. There. That was next. Not who Mercer loved. Not

where Mercer slept. Not whether Mercer was man or woman. Who paid for the photographs. Money leaves records. Sometimes. That might be easier. Then another thought.

If Mercer traveled town to town offering photographic work, newspaper classifieds might repeat. I wrote: Search other towns along likely routes for same wording. Good. That could actually identify movement pattern. Then perhaps home base. Maybe. Careful. I closed notebook. Echo shifted under cover. Katniss slept. Blaze slept. Four. No longer strange. That surprised me. The enclosure hadn't made Echo part of group. The decision hadn't either.

Routine had. Morning. Road. Stops. Cleaning. Noise. Managing Katniss. Answering whistles badly. Ordinary things. That was how belonging worked. Not ceremony. Repetition. I looked at today's keeper shots. Rail bridge. Old bridge and new bridge. Two. Both about routes. I laughed.

"Great."

From under cover: Bad whistle.

"Exactly."

I turned off light. Tomorrow we would keep moving. And somewhere behind us, E. Mercer had started moving too.

CHAPTER 49

A Name in Motion

The next morning, Echo yelled at a cloud. I could not prove that was what he meant. But timing suggested guilt. The cloud moved across the window. Echo leaned forward. Sharp call. The cloud continued.

“Effective.”

Katniss opened one eye. Blaze did not bother. The enclosure had survived the night without complaint. No rattles. No shifted bolts. No loose tray. Good. I checked anyway. Every fastener. Every mount. Latch. Shield. Temperature. Echo watched.

“You live here now. Inspections happen.”

Bad whistle.

“Correct.”

Coffee. Breakfast. Nectar. Fruit. Cleaning. Routine had become more complicated. Not harder exactly. Just longer. I had started measuring mornings by how many species had eaten before I did. Three. Apparently that was the number now. I ate last. The newspaper pages sat inside notebook. E. Mercer. Photographic work. Roads. River country. Improvements. Crossings. For once, I did not open them.

South first. We packed. Echo had begun recognizing the enclosure as the place he went when the engine started. No coaxing. No transfer ritual. I opened the access. He climbed in. That mattered more than I expected. Katniss watched from bench.

“Your turn is passenger seat.”

She went there. Good. Blaze settled behind me. Engine. Wind. Road. Four. The first hour gave us nothing worth stopping for. Perfect. Fields. Trees. Low towns. Fuel signs. Mailbox clusters. Echo yelled at one tractor. Ignored another. No clear standards. At a stoplight, a school bus crossed in front of us. Echo froze. Just slightly. Then relaxed. No whistle. No alarm.

Interesting. Diane’s bus-hating bird had become a little less offended by buses. Or one bus. I did not make meaning from it. Mostly. At nine thirty, we reached a town big enough for a courthouse. That usually

meant records. Dangerous. I kept driving. Then saw: COUNTY HISTORICAL ARCHIVE PUBLIC HOURS TUES–SAT Today was Thursday. Unfortunate. I drove two blocks past it.

Stopped at coffee shop. Bought coffee. Stared at archive through windshield. Katniss sat beside me.

"No."

She looked toward archive.

"Don't."

Echo whistled.

"Both of you are unreliable."

Blaze slept. One loyal employee. Cool day. Shade. Animals secure. Short visit. I went inside. The archive occupied an old county office. High ceilings. Wood floors. Metal shelving visible through open doorway. A woman at desk looked up. Late sixties maybe. Short gray hair. Blue sweater.

"Research?"

"Possibly."

"Genealogy?"

"No."

She looked relieved.

"Good."

Interesting. Her name was Ruth. Different Ruth. Names continued recycling. I explained Mercer. Briefly. Old photographs. Olympic Peninsula. 1890s. Newspaper mentions. Photographic work. Possibly traveling. Possibly commercial. Ruth listened. Then: "Do you know where Mercer lived?"

"No."

"First name?"

"No."

"Gender?"

"No."

"Business name?"

"No."

She smiled.

"Excellent."

"That's not the word I use."

"It means you haven't already decided what you're finding."

Good. She asked what I wanted.

"Movement."

Ruth paused.

"Meaning?"

"Places where Mercer advertised. Worked. Sold photographs. Maybe repeated routes."

That interested her.

"You're building itinerary."

"Maybe."

"Then don't start with people."

I looked at her.

"Start with newspapers and transportation."

There it was again. She brought out county maps. Not modern. 1880s. 1890s. Rail lines. Stage routes. Ferry crossings. Post offices. Towns that barely existed now. I recognized some names from newspaper search. Not all. Ruth laid a modern map beside old one.

"These places look close now."

They did.

"They weren't."

Road quality. River crossings. Season. Rail. Mountain grades. Distance wasn't miles. It was difficulty. That mattered. I took notebook. Ruth continued.

"If somebody traveled with photographic equipment, they'd likely follow predictable transportation unless they had a reason not to."

"Rail?"

"Where available."

"Stage?"

"Yes."

"Wagon."

"Yes."

"Boat."

"Absolutely."

"And if they were documenting something remote?"

"Then you look for whoever paid to get them there."

I stopped writing. Who paid. Again. Ruth noticed.

"You already thought that."

"Last night."

"Good."

There was that word. She pulled a local business directory. Photographers. Studios. Hardware. Hotels. Livery. Surveyors. Newspapers. No Mercer. I checked twice. Nothing. That was useful.

“Not local?” I asked.

“Maybe.”

“Traveling.”

“Maybe.”

“Unlisted.”

“Maybe.”

“You like that word too much.”

Ruth smiled.

“Archives run on maybe.”

Fair. Then she showed me classified indexes. Not full newspapers. Compiled names and subjects. Mercer appeared once. I froze. Mercer, E. — photographic views — see advertising, 1891 That was all. But there was a cross-reference number. Ruth disappeared into back room. Returned with microfilm box.

“You’re going to hate this.”

“I already do.”

Old reader. Manual. Dim screen. Good. We found issue. Advertisement small. Not the one I had seen. Different town. Different month. I read carefully. This one was clearer. E. Mercer, photographer of views, will remain in the district several days. Orders for residences, mills, camps and improvements received at— Then business name. A hotel. I stopped. Photographer of views.

Not assumed. Printed. I copied exactly. Ruth leaned closer.

“That’s useful.”

“Yes.”

No excitement. Too early. Then the hotel name. Riverside House. I wrote.

“Hotel register?” I asked.

Ruth looked at me.

“Maybe.”

Of course. She checked finding aid. No register. Good. Mystery retained dignity. But hotel advertisements survived. Riverside House near ferry landing. Stage stop. Meals. Rooms. Stable. Transport hub. Mercer had been taking orders from a place travelers naturally passed through. That mattered. I looked at old map. Town from previous newspaper notice. Hotel town. Postcard town. Not line. Yet.

Ruth gave me tracing paper.

"Mark dates."

I did. 1890 classified. 1891 display notice. Another 1891 ad. 1892 postcard. Four points. Then transportation routes. A rough corridor emerged. Not straight. No modern road. River. Stage road. Rail segment. Ferry. I stared. Mercer was moving. Not randomly. At least not according to surviving evidence. I wrote: Possible recurring corridor. Need more dates before calling route. Good.

Ruth approved.

"Don't draw a line through four points and call it truth."

"I wasn't."

"You were thinking about it."

"Possibly."

She smiled. Then she asked: "Do you have photographs?" Copies. Digital. I showed her the six Mercer images. She studied longer than expected. River crossing. Settlement. Timber. Road. Other views. Then she pointed to one.

"That's not composed like portrait work."

"No."

"Neither is this."

"No."

"These look commercial."

"Maybe."

She laughed.

"Now you're doing it."

Fair. She pointed to timber image.

"Could have been ordered by mill owner."

Settlement.

"Business association."

Road.

"County."

River crossing.

"Ferry operator. Engineer. Newspaper. Land company."

Many possibilities. Good. Then she paused at one photograph.

"What's on the mount?"

I enlarged phone image. Almost nothing. Wear. Pencil. Old adhesive. She pointed.

"Lower right."

I zoomed. Tiny mark. Not name. Not letters exactly. A number. Maybe. 14 Or 17. Could be nothing. Ruth said: "Commercial photographers often numbered negatives or views." I looked at the other images. Two had possible marks. One looked like 22. Another maybe 6. I had never noticed. Because I had been looking for names. Interesting.

"If they're numbers—"

"They may have been part of a catalog."

That changed temperature in room. Not literally. I sat straighter. A catalog meant more photographs. Potentially many more. Maybe surviving somewhere under numbers instead of Mercer. I wrote: Check all mounts for numbering. Possible view series/catalog. Then: If commercial series, search by location + number, not only Mercer. That was useful. Very. Ruth said: "Now you've got work."

"I had work."

"Now you have organized work."

Worse. I stayed another hour. No first name. No gender. No portrait. No home address. Good. Instead, something better. Context. E. Mercer called themselves—or was called—a photographer of views. Took orders. Stayed in districts temporarily. Worked from hotels. Possibly numbered photographs. That was more person than I had yesterday. Not identity. Practice. I liked that better.

I paid for copies. Again. Paper multiplying. Outside, Blaze greeted me. Katniss sat passenger seat. Echo climbed side of enclosure. I held up papers.

"Photographer of views."

Echo whistled.

"Yes. Very exciting."

Blaze wanted walk. Correct priority. We walked. Then lunch. I sat under tree with notebook. Old map copy. Dates. Dots. I drew no connecting line. Ruth would know somehow. Instead, arrows beside each point. Stage. Rail. Ferry. River. Possible movement. Not proof. Then I noticed something. The dates progressed generally south. Not perfectly. But mostly. I looked at map.

Mercer had been traveling. Bone was traveling. No. I closed notebook. Too easy. Not everything needed thematic symmetry. Blaze drank water. Katniss watched sparrow.

"Leave it."

Her ears moved. Echo was inside van, secure. Good. Road again. South. Of course. The irony annoyed me. We drove thirty miles before I laughed.

"Fine."

Nobody asked. Afternoon road narrowed near river. Old retaining wall. Cliffs. Trees. At one pullout, an abandoned stone building sat near water. Maybe pump house. Maybe storage. I photographed once. Bad. No second frame. Not everything deserved effort. Ten miles later, I stopped again.

A ferry landing. Modern ferry gone. Landing remains. Concrete ramp into river. Opposite bank road climbed away through trees. I stared. Mercer. No. I walked with camera anyway. The scene resembled old photograph enough to be annoying. Not same place. Probably. I caught myself.

"Retired."

I framed. Ramp foreground. River broad. Road opposite disappearing. Too Mercer. I moved sideways. Included modern guardrail. A faded warning sign. The remains of landing. Better. Present, not imitation. Waited. A small fishing boat crossed midriver. Click. Good. Keeper. I looked at photograph. Still Mercer-adjacent. Fine. Influence was real. Not theft. We continued. Echo rode well. At rest area, out time. Divider. Katniss separate. Blaze positioned.

Echo stepped to shoulder immediately. Pirate phase becoming policy. He grabbed hat brim.

"No."

He let go. Good. Then three notes. I answered. Closer. He repeated. Margaret had been right. The whistle didn't belong to only one person anymore. That was strange. Not wrong. I sent her audio recording. She replied: You're getting better. Unfortunately. Good. Then: He sounds happy. I stared. Comfortable. Priya's word. Not happy. I typed: He seems comfortable.

Margaret sent: You have been around Priya too long. Possibly. I put phone away. Echo chewed hat.

"No."

Evening campground sat near river. No trial. No special setup. Routine. Blaze. Katniss. Echo. Dinner. Cleaning. A lot of cleaning. The permanent enclosure had made things easier. Not clean. Never clean. Just easier. Echo threw fruit. Katniss watched piece land outside shield. Before she could investigate: "No." She looked at me. I cleaned it.

"This is why we can't have shared snacks."

Blaze appeared.

"Nobody invited you."

Family systems. After dark, Echo settled. I opened notebook. Today's Mercer notes took two pages. 1891 advertisement: "E. Mercer, photographer of views..." I copied rest exactly. Orders for residences, mills, camps and improvements. That mattered. Not only roads. Buildings. Businesses. Work sites. Commercial. Likely. Then: Taking orders from Riverside House near ferry/stage stop. Then: Possible numbered views on mounts. Check originals/copies carefully.

Then: Could be cataloged commercial series. Search by view numbers and subjects. Then map. Dates. Transportation. I left points unconnected. Good. Then today's photograph. Old ferry landing / modern guardrail / fishing boat. Keeper. I looked at it again. Maybe Mercer would have stood somewhere else. Maybe Mercer would have waited for empty river. Maybe Mercer would have centered road.

Didn't matter. I wasn't Mercer. Good. Then one final note: Question has changed. I stopped. What had question been? Who was E. Mercer? Still. But now there were smaller questions underneath. How did Mercer work? Where did Mercer travel? Who hired Mercer? How were the images sold? Were they numbered? Was there a catalog? Those questions could be answered without first knowing a full name.

That felt like progress. I wrote: Find the work. Person may follow. Closed notebook. Outside, river moved in darkness. Blaze slept. Katniss curled near bench. Echo quiet under cover. Four. Ordinary now. The strange thing was not that Echo had become part of road. The strange thing was how quickly road had made room. I looked at old map. Four dots. No line.

Mercer had become movement before becoming a person. Maybe that was fitting. For now.

CHAPTER 50

Who Paid

The next morning began with fruit on the ceiling. I had stopped asking how. Echo sat inside the enclosure. Looking innocent. There was mango above him. Not near him. Above. I looked at ceiling. Then bird. Then ceiling.

“Physics remains under investigation.”

Bad whistle. Katniss inspected the floor beneath the enclosure. Nothing edible had survived. Blaze slept. He had learned that bird-related mysteries rarely involved him. Smart. Coffee. Breakfast. Nectar. Cleaning. More cleaning. The enclosure had already changed morning. Not dramatically. Just enough.

Echo moved around it comfortably now. Lower perch. Higher perch. Food. Water. Side. Back. No hesitation. Good. I checked the mounts. Still tight. Then checked them again. Echo watched.

“Maintenance.”

Three notes. I answered. Closer now. Still wrong. He repeated them more slowly. I stared.

“Was that criticism?”

Bad whistle. Yes. The Mercer papers had multiplied. That was becoming another problem. Newspaper copies. Maps. Notes. Photograph printouts. Dates. Possible view numbers. Hotel advertisements. Transportation routes. I had moved all of it into a document envelope. Then another. Then a third. Organization. Technically. I spread some of it across the table while coffee cooled. E. Mercer, photographer of views.

That phrase still bothered me. In a useful way. Residences. Mills. Camps. Improvements. Orders received at Riverside House. Who paid? That question felt better than who was Mercer. Smaller. More practical. People paid photographers for reasons. Property. Promotion. Progress. Proof. Pride. Maybe vanity. Humans were versatile. I looked at the numbered marks on copies. Possible 6.

If they really were view numbers, then the six photographs I knew were fragments of something larger. A catalog? A sales set? A commission record? Maybe. I wrote: Find repeated business names near locations. Then: County contracts? Mill advertisements? Land companies? Hotels? Ferry operators? Echo made sharp call. I looked up. A crow had landed outside. Katniss was already looking.

"Everybody calm down."

Nobody was not calm except me. Good. I packed the papers. South. Road first. Mystery later. Echo climbed into his travel enclosure without hesitation. That was becoming ordinary. Katniss took passenger seat. Blaze settled. Engine. The van moved. Echo shifted with first turn. Then returned to food. Good. For forty minutes, the road stayed boring. Excellent.

Then the landscape widened. Fields giving way to low industrial buildings. Rail siding. Old mill structures. Mercer entered my head without invitation. Mills. I kept driving. Another mill. Modern. Then an abandoned one farther back. Brick. Broken windows. Stack shortened by time. I slowed. No. Not everything. Five miles later I stopped at a grocery store. Food. Water. Coffee.

Inside, a bulletin board beside exit had flyers. Lost dog. Church sale. Farm equipment. Local history lecture. I looked. INDUSTRY ALONG THE RIVER LOGGING, MILLS & TRANSPORTATION SATURDAY — COUNTY MUSEUM Today was Friday. Of course. I photographed flyer with phone. Reference. Not artistic. Then laughed. I had become the sort of person who photographed bulletin boards. Dangerous. Back at van: "Tomorrow."

Echo whistled.

"No promise."

Katniss moved from passenger seat to dashboard. I looked at her.

"Correct surface."

She ignored me. We drove. At eleven, I stopped at public park beside river. Routine. Blaze out. Katniss out. Echo secure. Then later: divider. Katniss separated. Blaze positioned. Echo out. He stepped onto hand immediately. Then wrist. Shoulder. I allowed it. He grabbed hat brim.

"No."

Released. Progress. A woman walking past stopped.

"Oh, he's beautiful."

Echo yelled. She laughed.

"He knows."

"Unfortunately."

She asked his name.

"Echo."

"Good name."

He gave three notes. Then bad whistle.

"Complicated name."

She laughed again and kept walking. Echo watched her leave. Then reached for hat.

"No."

We stayed twenty minutes. Back inside enclosure. Divider down. Katniss regained van. No drama. Good. I ate lunch. Opened notebook. The flyer. Tomorrow. County museum. Mills. Transportation. Could matter. Could not. I decided not to arrange day around it. That was growth. Maybe. The road took us through another town. Old commercial district. A bank building. Hotel. Hardware.

Hotel. I slowed. Not Riverside House. Different. Still. Hotels mattered to traveling photographers. I had spent years thinking of hotels as destinations. In 1891 they could be offices. Mail drops. Meeting places. Advertisement addresses. Transport nodes. Useful. I wrote mentally. Then decided mental notes were how things disappeared. Pulled over.

Notebook: Hotels may function as temporary studios/business addresses. Search hotel registers, ads, proprietor names, not just photographer listings. Good. Then something else. If Mercer took orders at Riverside House, maybe hotel proprietor benefited. Maybe proprietor advertised Mercer. Maybe photographer and hotel had arrangement. I wrote: Who owned Riverside House? There. Specific. That could be answered. I looked at clock. Early afternoon.

Town library was across street. Of course. Cool day. Shade. Short stop. Animals secure. Inside, I asked for city directories and historical newspaper access. The librarian showed me both. Riverside House first. Search. Too many Riverside Houses. Different states. Different towns. I used town from advertisement. There. Hotel ads. Riverside House — J. W. Talbot, Proprietor. Good. Stage connections. Meals. Stable. Boats arranged. Commercial travelers accommodated.

Commercial travelers. Photographers probably counted. I searched Talbot + Mercer. Nothing. Talbot + photographer. Nothing. Riverside House + photographic. One hit. Not Mercer. An earlier photographer. Another traveling photographer had taken orders at the same hotel. I stared. That mattered. Not because of Mercer. Because of hotel. Riverside House may have routinely served traveling photographers. So Mercer using it did not imply special connection.

Good. One assumption removed. I wrote: Riverside House likely normal commercial base, not Mercer-specific. Another traveling photographer advertised there in 1888. Useful. Then searched business ads around Mercer's dates. Mill company. Land office. Ferry service. General store. One name repeated. North River Improvement Company. Road work. Timber contracts. Bridge materials. Land clearing. Improvement. That word from Mercer advertisement.

Could be coincidence. I searched company + photographs. Nothing. Company + Mercer. Nothing. Company + views. One result. A report mentioned photographic views of recent work being available at company office. No photographer named. I sat straighter. Could be Mercer. Could be someone else. Do not decide. I copied exact line.

"Photographic views of the recent river and road improvements may be seen at the company's office."

Date. Two weeks after Mercer's advertisement. Interesting. Not proof. But timing. I searched earlier issue. Company had completed sections of wagon road and reinforcement near ferry approach. Road. River. Improvements. Crossings. All words circling Mercer. I felt the old temptation. Line everything up. Make answer. No.

I wrote: Possible client: North River Improvement Company. Evidence circumstantial only. Need named connection. Good. Then: Search payments / minutes / annual reports / county contracts. That sounded miserable. Excellent. I printed three pages. Paper again. Twenty cents each. Inflation of mystery. Outside, Echo saw me through window. Whistle. I held up papers.

"Still not food."

Blaze wanted walk. Correct. We walked around block. Katniss came. Harness. She stopped at alley. Focused on something. Probably bird. Maybe mouse.

"Leave it."

She looked at me. Then walked. Good. No celebration. We drove. Afternoon light flattened. No photographs. Fine. The road followed river for a while. Then climbed. At one overlook, I stopped for water. Below: modern highway. Old road scar. River. Rail line. Three eras of movement in one view. I reached for camera. Then paused. Mercer again. I almost didn't take it.

That was becoming equally stupid. Avoiding a photograph because it resembled Mercer gave Mercer too much control too. I took camera. First frame. Wide. Everything. Too much. Second. Rail line lower edge. Old road scar through middle. Modern highway higher. River tying all of it. Better. Waited. A freight train entered. Too obvious. I lowered camera. Train passed.

Good. Then a single truck entered modern road. Small. Click. Keeper. I checked. Mine. Good enough. We continued. Late afternoon brought clouds. Campground near trees. Nothing spectacular. Routine. Echo out behind divider. Shoulder. Hat. No chewing. Almost. Katniss watched less than yesterday. Blaze ignored all of us. Good. Echo flew once. Short. Perch to my hand. Controlled. Katniss's body changed instantly.

Eyes. Shoulders. Focus. I caught it. Echo back to perch. Out time ended shortly after. No drama. But reminder. Familiarity did not erase instinct. Good. I wrote that down before dinner. Katniss response stronger to actual flight than perch/shoulder movement. Maintain physical separation every time Echo is out. Important. Dinner. Cleaning. Echo somehow put fruit on enclosure exterior.

No comment. After dark, I spread Mercer papers. Not all. Enough. North River Improvement Company. Photographic views of recent river and road improvements. Two weeks after Mercer advertising himself as photographer of views. Maybe. I drew no conclusion. Then I searched offline copies and notes. Mercer advertisement location. Company work locations. Overlap. Not perfect. Close. I wrote: If company hired Mercer, likely payment record somewhere.

County archive? Company records? Newspaper legal notices? Bankruptcy? Corporate filings? Then: Could also be photographer selling views independently after seeing public interest in improvements. Good. Two explanations. At least. Then another: Company may have purchased existing views rather than commissioned them. Three. Better. Mystery stayed honest. I looked at view numbers again. If those were catalog numbers, perhaps a series included different clients.

Maybe payment wouldn't solve all of it. Still. Who paid was a path. Not answer. I wrote: Follow money, but don't assume money leads to identity. Good. Then today's photograph: River corridor: rail / old road / modern highway / single truck. Keeper. I looked at it. Layers of routes. Maybe Mercer would have liked it. That thought didn't bother me this time.

Interesting. I closed notebook. Echo settled under cover. Blaze slept. Katniss cleaned paw. Four. Tomorrow there was a museum lecture about mills and transportation. I had not decided whether to go. Good. Plans were useful. So were accidents.

Somewhere in 1891, someone had paid E. Mercer for something. Or bought something afterward. Or both. Money had moved. Photographs had moved. Mercer had moved. And if records survived, eventually one of them might say more than an initial. Not tomorrow necessarily. That was fine.

CHAPTER 51

What the Company Kept

The museum lecture started at ten. I knew this because I had spent the previous evening pretending I had not decided to attend. At eight fifteen, I was already twelve miles away.

“Coincidence.” Katniss looked out the passenger window.

Blaze slept. Echo ate. Nobody believed me. Good. The road followed river most of the way. Cool morning. Clouds high. No dramatic light. That helped. I had enough distractions. North River Improvement Company. Photographic views. Road work. River work. Two weeks between the references. Circumstantial. Still.

I had read the newspaper copies again over breakfast. Then stopped. Then read them again. Echo yelled halfway through the second reading.

“Correct.”

He continued.

“Research criticism noted.”

By nine, we reached town. I did not park at museum. Too early. That would have looked interested. Instead I parked three blocks away. Coffee. Walk. Water. Blaze enjoyed town. Katniss tolerated it. Echo remained secure in the enclosure while we were outside. At nine thirty-eight, I returned to van. At nine forty-one, I checked temperature.

At nine forty-three, enclosure latch. At nine forty-five, water. At nine forty-six, I realized what I was doing.

“Fine.”

Museum. The county museum occupied an old brick building that had apparently been several things before becoming a museum. School. Municipal office. Something involving records. Now it contained history and folding chairs. Good. The lecture room was nearly full. That surprised me.

Retired people. Two college students. A family with a teenager who looked like history had personally offended him. I sat near back. The speaker was a man named Dr. Samuel Greene. Local historian. Former

community-college instructor. He had slides. Dangerous. Title: INDUSTRY ALONG THE RIVER: LOGGING, MILLS & TRANSPORTATION Same as flyer. He started broad. River before roads. Indigenous travel routes. Settler roads. Ferries. Mills. Logging. Rail.

I listened. Not everything applied to Mercer. That was important. History did not exist to solve my question. I wrote that down. Then crossed it out. Too self-conscious. Greene moved into the late nineteenth century. Road improvement companies. Private contracts. County partnerships. Land promotion. Mill access. Bridge approaches. Ferry improvements. North River Improvement Company appeared on screen.

I sat straighter. Not dramatically. Probably. The company had formed to improve access along river corridor. Road grading. Drainage. Bridge approaches. Timber access. Some ferry-related work. Not unusual. Greene showed a photograph. Road crew. Wagons. Cut hillside. Unknown photographer. I stared. Not Mercer. Maybe. No. Unknown. Leave it there. Next slide. Company office. Small building. Men outside.

Photographer credited to local studio. Not Mercer. Good. That was useful too. Mercer was not the only person photographing these things. Then Greene said: "Companies like this sometimes commissioned photographs to document progress for investors, county officials, or promotional materials." There. I wrote exactly that. Not because it proved Mercer. Because it made the possibility ordinary. Ordinary was good.

The mystery kept becoming less romantic and more interesting. Then: "Unfortunately, many business records from smaller improvement companies were not preserved." Of course. A woman in front asked why. Greene shrugged.

"Because nobody in 1895 knew somebody in 2026 would care about their receipts."

I liked him. He continued. North River Improvement Company had dissolved after several years. Some papers apparently went to county offices. Some to a successor land company. Some vanished. I wrote: Successor company? Then the name: North River Land & Timber Association Interesting. That organization survived longer. Greene showed a scanned ledger page. Payments. Supplies. Teamsters. Surveying. Lumber. Hotel expenses.

I leaned forward. Photography? Slide changed.

"No."

The woman beside me looked over.

"Sorry."

She moved one chair farther away. Reasonable. Greene talked about company spending. Survey crews stayed at local hotels. Contractors submitted vouchers. Photographers occasionally appeared under general expenses, advertising, or documentation rather than their own category. I wrote faster. That complicated the search. Good. Then he showed another ledger. North River Improvement Company. I could not read from back.

After lecture, maybe. Do not interrupt historian over century-old bookkeeping. Growth. The lecture moved on to rail. Then mill consolidation. Then decline of ferry traffic. Interesting. Not Mercer. I listened anyway. At end, questions. I waited. People asked about specific mills. Old bridge. Family names. Flood. Then I raised hand. Greene pointed.

"Do you know whether surviving North River Improvement Company records include payments for photography around 1890 or 1891?"

He paused.

"Specific photographer?"

"E. Mercer."

Something changed in his face. Not recognition. Thinking.

"Mercer."

He repeated it. Then shook head.

"Doesn't immediately ring a bell."

Good.

"I've found newspaper advertisements."

"What kind?"

"Photographer of views. Orders for residences, mills, camps, improvements."

That interested him.

"And another newspaper says photographic views of recent river and road improvements were available at company office."

Greene nodded slowly.

"Same dates?"

"Within two weeks."

"Might be something."

Might.

"Could also be coincidence." I said.

He smiled.

"You've done this before."

"Unfortunately."

He told me some company records had been microfilmed by county archive decades ago. Originals partly scattered.

"There's also an accession from the successor company."

"Where?"

"Here."

I looked around. Of course. Museum basement archive. Appointment usually required.

"But since you're already here..."

Dangerous sentence. He talked to museum director. Twenty minutes later, I was downstairs. Cooler. Concrete floor. Shelving. Boxes. No dramatic lighting. No music. Excellent. The museum director, Lena, brought out finding aid. North River Improvement Company. 1889–1894. Correspondence. Ledgers. Contracts. Invoices. Maps. Photographs. Photographs. I stared. Lena noticed.

"That's not necessarily what you think."

"I know."

Good warning. The photograph folder contained copies. Mostly company office. Road crews. Bridge construction. Mill access. Photographers sometimes credited. Sometimes not. No Mercer. Fine. Then ledgers. I looked for obvious entries. Photograph. Photographer. Views. Advertising. Nothing. Then remembered Greene. General expenses. I started slower. Hotel. Travel. Supplies. Printing. Postage. A line in September. Views — 12.00 I stopped.

No name. Next week: Views & mounts — 7.50 No name. Could be photographs. Could be maps. Could be something else. I wrote exact wording. Then October: Advertising matter — 18.40 Nothing. Another: Photographic views — 15.00 There. Still no Mercer. I stared. Lena looked over.

"Something?"

"Maybe."

She smiled. Archive people all liked maybe. I compared dates. Mercer's advertisement. Company newspaper notice. Ledger. Close. Very close. Not proof. But closer. I wrote: Need voucher/invoice supporting ledger entry. Lena nodded.

"If it survived."

Of course. We checked box list. Vouchers. Partial. There were hundreds. I did not cheer. Nobody should cheer over hundreds of vouchers. We started around relevant date. Hotel. Feed. Lumber. Teamster. Hardware. Survey supplies. Then: No. 1847 — Advertising / Views I stopped.

Envelope empty. Of course. Just wrapper. On wrapper: Paid Oct. 3, 1891 No recipient. I laughed once.

Lena looked over.

"That's usually not the reaction."

"It's appropriate."

She nodded. We kept going. No invoice. But voucher number mattered. Maybe referenced elsewhere. Cash book? Correspondence? Now paperwork multiplied. I could feel Mercer becoming heavier inside notebook. Good. Then another folder. Company correspondence. One letter mentioned: views received No photographer. Another: additional copies requested No photographer. Another: send two views to county office No photographer. I stared at sequence.

Photographs were definitely circulating. The company was definitely paying for photographic views. Still no named connection. That was frustrating. Useful frustration. I wrote: North River Improvement Company definitely purchased/used photographic views during Mercer period. Connection to Mercer still unproven. Underline unproven. Good. Then Lena found something else. A small inventory sheet from successor company. Later date. Probably 1904.

Listed materials transferred from older office. Maps. Survey books. Photographic negatives. Mounted views. Numbers. Numbers. I leaned closer. Views 1–32, incomplete. I stopped. Thirty-two.

Possible mount numbers I had: No. Could be coincidence. I wrote nothing for a moment. Then: Company inventory later lists views 1–32, incomplete. Compare mount numbers cautiously. Cautiously. Very. Lena asked what numbers I had. I showed her. She did not react dramatically. Good.

"Could fit."

"Could."

"Could also be completely different series."

"Yes."

We were getting along. Then she said: "Do you have images of the mounts?" I did. We compared handwriting. Inventory numbers typed. Mount numbers pencil. No help. Different hands anyway. Still. Thirty-two. If Mercer's photographs belonged to a numbered company view series, then the paperwork problem had just become considerably worse. I looked at the growing stack.

"Excellent."

It was not excellent. By three, my eyes hurt. I stopped. Important. More time did not automatically produce better thinking. I thanked Lena. Greene had left. I made appointment request for future archive

access. Not tomorrow. Good. Outside, sun had shifted. The van waited in shade. Blaze greeted me. Katniss occupied passenger seat. Echo climbed enclosure.

"Paperwork."

Echo yelled.

"Correct."

We walked. Longer than usual. I needed it. Blaze definitely did. Katniss came partway, then decided grass was more interesting. I sat beneath tree. Spread no papers. Excellent. For twenty minutes, Mercer did not exist. Then Echo whistled from van. My bad whistle. I answered from outside. A man at nearby picnic table looked around. I pretended nothing happened.

We left town around four. No museum tomorrow. No archive. No plan. Good. The road climbed away from river. Light improved. Camera stayed beside me. Then I saw irrigation canal cutting across dry field. Old wooden flume remnant beside modern concrete channel. I slowed. Old system. New system. Again. Maybe I had a problem. I stopped anyway. Camera.

First frame: too much concrete. Second: wooden flume dominant. Modern channel behind. Too obvious. I moved lower. Now old flume edge entered foreground while modern water carried reflection toward distance. Better. Waited. Cloud opened. Brief light on water. Click. Keeper. One. Enough. We continued. At camp, Echo got out time. Divider up. Katniss separated. Blaze positioned. Echo shoulder.

He grabbed hat. I removed hat. He looked offended.

"Problem solved."

He stepped onto head. I froze. No hat. Bird. Skeleton skull. Katniss watched. Blaze looked up. Echo gave three notes directly above my ear opening.

"Too close."

He whistled again. I moved him to hand. Pirate phase had evolved. Unfortunate. Margaret would enjoy this. I took a quick phone photo using timer and van shelf. Not Bone's camera. Not keeper. Evidence. Sent. Her reply: Diane would've laughed for a week. Then: You look ridiculous. Fair. Echo returned to perch. Dinner. Cleaning. After dark, I opened notebook.

Unfortunately. Museum notes. Company notes. Ledger entries. Voucher number. Correspondence. Inventory. The Mercer file had become thick enough to need another envelope. I stared at it.

"No."

Echo shifted under cover. I found another envelope anyway. Then organized: Confirmed Mercer advertising photographic work. Mercer called photographer of views. Company purchasing/using photographic views. Company inventory later includes numbered view series 1–32. Possible Mercer supplied company views. Known Mercer mount numbers may correspond to company series. North River Improvement Company may have commissioned work.

Unknown Who received payments. Who numbered views. Whether all six known photographs belong to same series. Whether E. Mercer worked alone. What E stands for. Where Mercer lived. Gender. Still plenty. Good. Then I added: Voucher 1847 — Advertising / Views — paid Oct. 3, 1891. Supporting invoice missing. That number bothered me. Not useful photographically. Probably accounting. Still. Then: Search successor company materials for numbered view descriptions.

There. Next direction. Then today's photograph: Old wooden flume / modern channel / brief light. Keeper. I looked at it. Again old and new. Fine. Maybe that was just what I liked. No need to blame Mercer. I closed notebook. The paperwork did not fit neatly anymore. That was also fine. For now. Echo slept. Katniss slept. Blaze slept. I did not.

Not immediately. Views 1–32. Possible numbers 6, 14, 17, 22. Could be nothing. Probably. I almost laughed.

"Retired."

Then turned off light.

CHAPTER 52

Something Out of Place

Morning started with paper on the floor. Not much. One sheet. I saw it before coffee. Unfortunate. The Mercer envelope sat where I had left it. Closed. Mostly. One newspaper copy had slipped out. Or been pulled out. Or fallen out. I looked at Katniss. She sat on the bench. Perfectly innocent.

“Evidence.” Blink.

Blaze stretched. Echo climbed down toward breakfast. Nobody confessed. I picked up the page. It was the company notice. Photographic views of recent river and road improvements may be seen at the company’s office. Under it, partly covered, was the copied map from Ruth.

The newspaper page had landed almost exactly across the route where North River Improvement Company had been working. I stared. Coincidence. Probably. I looked at Katniss again. She washed one paw.

“Subtle.”

No response. I put the page back. Not where it had landed. Where it belonged. Coffee. Breakfast. Nectar. Cleaning. The enclosure stayed quiet. No loose washers. No rattles. Good. Echo threw fruit onto the tray. Less good. Blaze ate. Katniss ate. I ate last. Routine. The Mercer papers stayed closed. That was intentional. Today needed road. South.

The highway left river after twenty miles. Climbed through low country. Then dropped into forest. Echo watched trees. Katniss watched everything. Blaze slept. At one curve, Blaze lifted his head suddenly. Not alarm. Just awake. Nose toward open window vent. He sniffed. Again. Then looked toward trees. I glanced. Nothing.

“Deer?”

Blaze kept looking. Then settled. Fine. Ten minutes later, Katniss stood on passenger seat. Front paws against window. Focused. Not bird-focused. Something lower. Brush beside road. I slowed slightly. Nothing visible. She followed something with her eyes for maybe three seconds. Then lost it. Sat down.

“Useful.”

She ignored me. Echo gave one sharp sound. Not whistle. Then another sound came from somewhere outside. I looked toward trees. Could have been a bird. Probably was. Echo answered. The outside sound did not repeat. Fine. We kept driving. No mystery. Important.

By ten, the road reached a small recreation area beside a creek. Public. Pet-friendly. Good. We stopped. Blaze out first. Katniss second. Echo stayed secure. The creek ran shallow through trees. Blaze found three smells more important than me. Normal. Katniss walked well. Then stopped beside a low patch of brush. I almost kept walking. She didn't.

Something had been arranged beneath the branches. Not much. Twigs. Dry grass. A few broad leaves. Could have been wind. Could have been animal bedding. Except the leaves were tucked beneath two crossed sticks. I crouched. Katniss leaned forward.

"No."

She stopped. Blaze sniffed. Then sneezed. Helpful. I looked closer. Nothing manufactured. Nothing dangerous. Just natural material. Arranged. Maybe. I stood.

"Somebody had a project."

Could have been a child. Could have been a bird. Could have been water. Could have been nothing. We moved on. I did not photograph it. Good. At creek crossing, old stepping stones had been placed unevenly. Not official. Someone had added flat pieces of bark between two larger rocks. Temporary. Useful. I stepped across. Blaze used water. Of course.

Katniss used stones. The bark held. I looked back. Nothing. Interesting. Not important. We returned to van. Echo got out time. Divider up. Katniss separated. Blaze settled. Echo went hand. Wrist. Shoulder. Pirate policy. He leaned toward trees. Then made a sound I had not heard from him before. Short. Two-part. Not Diane's whistle. Not mine. I waited.

From somewhere beyond parking area came a faint answer. Not exact. Close enough to make me look. Echo did it again. Nothing. I looked toward brush. No movement.

"You're making friends."

Echo pulled at hat brim.

"That is not friendship."

Katniss stared toward same trees. For once, not at Echo. Interesting. Then she looked away. Good enough. We stayed twenty minutes. Routine. Back inside. Divider down. Road. At noon, I found a town with a library. I did not stop. This felt heroic. Then saw a sign: COUNTY RECORDS ANNEX I kept driving. Better. Mercer could wait one day.

The world survived. We ate lunch at roadside park. No papers. No research. Just sandwich. Dog. Cat. Bird. Echo dropped fruit. Katniss noticed.

"No."

She looked at me. I cleaned it. Blaze appeared.

"No."

He looked at me.

"Universal policy."

Good. Afternoon road became rougher. Not bad. Old patchwork. The enclosure isolation mounts worked. Small movement. No rattle. Echo adjusted normally. Good. At one bump, something fell behind me. Paper. I stopped at turnout. The Mercer envelope again. This time fully open. I stared. Katniss was in passenger seat. Couldn't have reached it while moving. Blaze had been asleep.

Echo enclosed. I looked at road vibration. Possible. The envelope had been on shelf. Maybe not flat. Fine. I gathered papers. One photograph printout lay face down. I flipped it. View 14. Beside it: the company inventory note. Views 1–32, incomplete. I stopped. Again. Not proof. Just two papers landing beside each other. Still. I wrote nothing.

I put them back separately. Closed envelope better. Added clip.

"There."

Echo whistled.

"Exactly."

We drove. Late afternoon brought open grassland. Wind. Low clouds. I saw fence posts running toward ridge. Camera. Maybe. Then I remembered the fog fence from some time back. No. Different day. Different light. Still no. I kept going. Ten minutes later, I stopped for something much less obvious. A drainage ditch. Shallow water. Tall grass. One bent sign reflected upside down.

Nothing historic. Nothing Mercer. Good. I framed. First shot too cluttered. Moved closer. Reflection became clearer than sign itself. Waited. Wind dropped. Click. Keeper. I smiled. Mine. Back at van, Blaze stood near open door. He sniffed air again. Same alertness as morning. Then walked around rear of van. I followed. Nothing. Tracks in dust. Mostly ours. Tire. Dog. Cat maybe. Bird impossible.

Then something near ditch edge. Small prints. I crouched. Not clear enough. Four-footed? Maybe. Then two deeper marks farther ahead. Could be overlapping prints. Could be rabbit. Raccoon. Something else. I knew enough not to identify bad tracks confidently. I stood.

"Unknown."

Good word. Blaze sniffed once more. Tail neutral. No concern. Fine. We continued. Camp that night sat among juniper and low scrub. Dry. Quiet. Set camp. Routine. Echo out. Katniss separated. Blaze positioned. Echo shoulder. He made the strange two-part sound again. I looked at him.

"New one?"

He repeated. Then from darkness beyond camp: something answered. Soft. Not close. I froze. Echo leaned forward. Again. Answer. Not identical. Could be bird. Could be small mammal. Could be someone making noise. I stood. Blaze stood too. Katniss turned toward brush. Nobody alarmed. That mattered. I moved Echo back to perch. Not because danger. Because enough. Divider stayed until Echo secure.

Then down. Katniss went immediately to doorway. Looked out. I turned on flashlight. Nothing. Juniper. Brush. Ground. Then one thing. Near edge of light, a twig was stuck upright in dirt. Not naturally fallen. A small bundle of dry grass had been tucked around its base. I stared. Wind could do strange things. Not that. Probably. I walked closer.

Blaze beside me. No growl. No raised hackles. He sniffed. Then looked past it. Into dark. I swept flashlight. Nothing.

"Animal."

Maybe. I left it alone. Important. Back at van, I locked routine down. Not fear. Just night. Food. Water. Check enclosure. Door. Windows. Nothing unusual. After dinner, I opened notebook. Mercer. I hesitated. Then wrote: Papers shifted twice today. Almost certainly vibration / bad storage. Clip envelope better. Good. Then stopped. Almost certainly. I crossed out almost certainly. Wrote: Likely vibration / bad storage.

Better. Then: View 14 ended up beside 1–32 inventory note. Coincidence. I stared. Why write coincidence? I crossed that out too. Left: View 14 ended up beside 1–32 inventory note. Enough. Then today's photograph: Drainage ditch / bent sign reflection. Keeper. Good. Then another page. Not Mercer. Blaze noticed scent twice. Katniss tracked movement once. Unknown tracks at turnout.

I looked at that. Too much. I nearly tore page out. Didn't. Then: Echo exchanged unfamiliar call with something outside at creek and camp. Likely bird. Likely. Fine. I closed notebook. Wind moved through juniper. Echo settled under cover. Katniss remained near doorway longer than usual. Blaze lay with head up. I listened. Nothing. Then: a faint scrape outside.

Blaze's ears moved. I waited. Another. Soft. Then nothing. I did not go outside. Good decision. Morning could explain things better than darkness. Eventually Blaze lowered head. Katniss came inside. I turned off

light. The Mercer envelope sat clipped shut. Good. Outside, something moved through brush. Or wind did. Either way, it did not come closer.

CHAPTER 53

The Order Things Take

Morning explained nothing. Which was rude. The twig-and-grass arrangement was still near edge of camp. Exactly where I had left it. No tracks around it that I trusted. No broken branches. No useful clue. Blaze sniffed once. Katniss sat ten feet away. Echo made breakfast noises. Normal. Mostly. I crouched beside the little arrangement. Twig upright. Dry grass tucked around base. Two leaves pressed flat beneath it.

Not shelter. Too small. Not nest. Too open. Maybe marker. Maybe nothing. I stood.

“Congratulations.” Blaze looked at me.

“We remain uninformed.”

He sneezed. Accurate. I left it alone. Coffee. Breakfast. Nectar. Cleaning. Then Mercer. Unfortunately. The clipped envelope had stayed shut. Good. Inside: company inventory. View numbers. ledger notes. Voucher 1847. Newspaper copies. Maps. I checked. Everything present. Then stopped. One page wasn’t where I remembered putting it. Not missing. Just different. The company inventory sheet sat behind the Mercer mount-number notes.

Then: Views 1–32, incomplete. I stared. Had I done that? Possible. Actually likely. I had spent half the previous night reorganizing. Still. The order made sense. More sense than the order I remembered. I left it. That felt oddly difficult. No need to fix what wasn’t wrong. Progress. We drove. The road wound through dry timber and open cuts. Nothing dramatic.

Blaze watched out one side. Katniss watched the other. Echo climbed. At a turnout, I stopped because the view was ordinary. I had started liking ordinary. Low hills. Old fence. A single cottonwood. No photograph. I walked Blaze. Katniss came on harness. Halfway around turnout, Blaze stopped. Nose down. Then up. He looked toward a cluster of juniper.

Tail neutral. Body loose. Curious. Katniss saw something too. Not same direction. Higher. One branch moved. No wind. I waited. Nothing. Then a small piece of bark dropped. Katniss tracked it. I looked up. Empty branches.

"Bird."

No bird. Still probably bird. We kept walking. At far end of turnout, somebody had stacked three flat stones beside a drainage pipe. Not cairn. Too low. The top stone leaned slightly. Under it: a narrow strip of bark. Again. Useful. Maybe. The bark kept stone from rocking. I nudged it gently with boot. Stable.

"Huh."

Blaze sniffed. Katniss sniffed. Then she looked past me. Quick. Brush. Nothing. We left. No photograph. By noon, clouds built over ridge. Good clouds. Photographic clouds. I ignored them. For twelve minutes. Then stopped beside old field gate. Camera.

The gate leaned inward. Wire fence disappeared toward foothills. Cloud shadow moved across field. First frame. Too centered. Second. Gate lower. More sky. Wait. Light moved. Fence stayed dark. One strip of grass brightened beyond it. Click. Keeper. Simple. Good. Back in van, Echo gave the strange two-part sound. Once. Then again. I waited. Nothing answered.

"Disappointing."

He stared at me. Then bad whistle.

"Better."

We continued. Around two, I stopped at a roadside picnic area. No other vehicles. Tables. Shade. Trash can. One weathered information board. Blaze out. Katniss out. Echo secure. I walked perimeter first. Habit. Behind one table, I found something. Not much. A short length of discarded twine. Probably from feed sack. Weathered. Brown. It had been looped around two low branches.

Not tied properly. Twisted. Below it, leaves and bark had been tucked into a shallow screen. I crouched. This was not wind. Maybe child. Maybe somebody camping. Maybe shelter for small animal. But it was only knee-high. And deliberate. Blaze sniffed. Then looked toward thicker brush. No tension. Katniss stepped closer. I blocked her gently with leg.

"Leave it."

She did. Good. I touched nothing. We moved away. At table, I ate. Echo watched from enclosure. Then called. Two-part sound. From brush: answer. Closer this time. I looked up. Blaze did too. Katniss froze. Not fear.

Focus. I listened. Nothing. Then: rustle. Low. Fast. Too fast to see. Katniss pulled once against harness.

"No."

She stopped. Good. Blaze took two steps toward brush.

"Stay."

He stayed. Good. Whatever was there did not come closer. I finished sandwich slower. That was intentional. No reason to teach myself that every rustle meant leave. Still. I watched brush. Nothing. We packed. As I closed side door, I noticed something beneath rear tire area. Small stick. Not under tire. Beside it. Placed crosswise against a loose plastic grocery bag that had blown under van.

Bag pinned. I stared. The bag hadn't been there when we arrived. Maybe wind put both there. No. Stick was laid across exact corner. I picked up bag. Trash. Left stick.

"Thank you, whoever."

That felt ridiculous. Fine. Road. An hour later, rain. Light rain. Good road. Echo watched drops. Katniss slept. Blaze slept. I thought about twine. Then stopped. There were enough real questions in my life. No need to invent another. Mercer. That was real. Maybe. At next town I found public library. I lasted seven minutes before parking. Weak.

Inside, I searched successor company name from museum. North River Land & Timber Association. Directories. Newspaper. Scanned business notices. Mostly boring. Then: 1902 liquidation notice. Not useful. 1903 property sale. Not useful. 1894 annual meeting. Maybe. Board names. One familiar surname. Talbot. Not J. W. Talbot. A. R. Talbot. Could be relation. Could be coincidence. I wrote it. Then hated myself a little.

Search. No clear relation. Leave it. Then another notice: photographic views available upon request North River Land & Timber Association. Interesting. No Mercer. Again. But if successor continued using numbered view series, the inventory might have combined photographs from multiple photographers. That mattered.

I wrote: Do not assume 1–32 all Mercer. Series may predate/postdate Mercer and combine work. Good. Then one more thing. A classified: Views of river lands, mills and improvements furnished to interested parties. No photographer. Commercial. Promotional. Ordinary. Mercer fit ecosystem. Not necessarily center. Good. I closed browser. Enough. Outside, rain had stopped. Van smelled like wet dog.

Blaze looked pleased.

"Naturally."

I drove until evening. Campground nearly empty. Trees. Packed dirt. Picnic ring. Routine. Before opening doors, I checked surroundings. Nothing. Good. Blaze out. Katniss out. Echo secure. Then I saw something near edge of campsite. A small pile. Not trash. Pine cone. Two acorn caps. Three pieces of bark. One blue bottle cap. Arranged in a line. I stopped.

Blue bottle cap did not belong. Human object. Could have been child. Probably child. Except no children. No one nearby. Old campsite. Could've been there days. I crouched. The objects weren't decorative. At least not obviously. Largest bark piece held bottle cap from rolling downhill. Acorn caps nested inside crack. Pine cone wedged at end. Functional? For what?

No idea. I left it. Blaze sniffed near it. Then moved past. Katniss sat and watched brush. Same brush behavior. I followed her gaze. Nothing. Then something very small moved between trunks. Dark. Low. Gone. I stood. Could have been raccoon. Wrong shape. Maybe. Could have been shadow. Probably. I waited. Nothing. Dinner. Echo out behind divider. Shoulder. Hand. Perch.

Then two-part call. Answer. Very faint. Closer than yesterday. Echo tilted head. Call again. Answer. Not mimic exactly. Different rhythm. I felt hair rise. Which was impressive.

"No."

Echo looked at me.

"Not you."

Blaze stood. Not alarmed. Just attentive. Katniss, behind divider, watched outside instead of Echo. That mattered. I kept Echo out five more minutes. No answer. Then back inside. Divider down. No drama. After dark, I set Mercer papers on table. Mistake. Too many. I tried organizing by date. Then location. Then subject. Nothing. I stacked view-number notes together.

Then company inventory. 1–32. Incomplete. Then promotional notices. I moved one. Stopped. Another page sat beneath it that I did not remember placing there. 1892 successor-company notice. Photographic views available upon request. Beside it: company transfer inventory. Views 1–32. Incomplete. I stared. That pairing suggested something. Not identity. Continuity. The numbered series might have belonged to company, not photographer.

That was important. I wrote: View numbering may be company-side cataloging, not Mercer-side numbering. Then: If so, Mercer mount numbers could have been assigned after delivery. That changed things. It meant I had been treating numbers as photographer sequence when

they might be client archive sequence. Good. I looked at two pages again. Why were they together?

Had I done that at library? Maybe. I couldn't remember. Too much paper. I put them together intentionally now. Then added one more note: Search whether other credited photographers appear with same mount numbering style. That was good. Very good. I sat back. Echo shifted. Blaze slept. Katniss watched door. Outside: soft scrape. Then another. I waited. Nothing.

I turned on exterior light. No movement. But the little line of objects near campsite had changed. Bottle cap was gone. Pine cone too. Only bark remained. I stared through window.

"All right."

Blaze lifted head.

"That one wasn't wind."

He looked toward dark. No growl. Fine. I did not go outside. Good. After a minute, something tapped lightly against van. Once. Not knock. Small. Maybe twig. I waited. Another tap. Lower. Katniss stood. Echo made two-part call from enclosure. Silence. Then from darkness: answer. Very close. Blaze got up. Still no growl. I kept light on.

Nobody moved. Then sound retreated. Brush. Soft. Quick. Gone. I stayed inside. Eventually Katniss settled. Blaze lay down. Echo tucked head. I looked at Mercer papers. Two pages paired together. Useful. Outside, something had also taken bottle cap and pine cone. I closed envelope. For first time, I clipped it shut and put it inside cabinet.

"Enough."

No one argued. I turned off light. In darkness, somewhere beyond van, two soft notes sounded. Not Echo. He answered once. Then quiet.

CHAPTER 54

Things That Don’t Stay Put

The bottle cap was back. I found it after breakfast. Not where it had been before. This time it sat on the van step. Blue. Scuffed. Dry. I stared at it. Blaze sniffed once. Katniss sniffed twice. Echo yelled from enclosure.

“Yes.”

I picked it up. Same cap. Probably. There were millions of blue bottle caps in world. Statistically. Still. I turned it over. Scratch along one side. Small dent. Same. I set it on table. Then reconsidered. No. I put it outside again. On ground. Where I could see it.

“Scientific method.”

Katniss walked away. Blaze did not care. Echo made two notes. Not my whistle. The other one. Nothing answered. Good. Coffee. I checked Mercer envelope. Still clipped. Still in cabinet. Still boring. Excellent. Then I opened it. Less excellent. The two pages from last night remained together. Successor-company notice. Inventory. Photographic views available upon request. Views 1–32, incomplete.

That pairing still mattered. Maybe. If the company cataloged photographs after receiving them, the pencil numbers on Mercer mounts might tell me nothing about Mercer’s own sequence. Which was irritating. I had spent weeks asking what the numbers meant. Now the answer might be: Not what you thought. Useful. Rude.

I wrote: Need comparison photographs from same company archive with known photographers. Check numbering style. Good. Then another thought. If other photographers’ work used same numbers or same mounts, that would make company-side numbering more likely. If only Mercer images had them, photographer-side sequence stayed possible. Simple. Which meant I needed more photographs. Of course. I closed notebook.

No archive today. I meant it. We left camp. The blue bottle cap stayed outside. I checked mirror as we pulled away. It remained in dirt. Good. Five miles later, I thought about turning around. I did not. Growth. Road narrowed into forest. Morning light through trees. Cool. Blaze awake.

Katniss in passenger seat. Echo climbing. At a bend, something crossed road. Fast. Dark. Low.

I slowed. Gone before I identified it. Blaze stood. Nose forward. Katniss leaned toward glass. Echo went quiet. That was new.

"What?"

Nobody answered. Good. I kept driving. Probably raccoon. Too quick to know. Ten minutes later, Echo made the two-part call. From trees: answer. Very faint. I looked toward side mirror. Nothing. Then again. Echo. Answer. Not exact mimic. Still. I smiled despite myself.

"You have a pen pal."

Bad whistle.

"Never mind."

The road opened near a small lake around eleven. Public access. Few cars. Good stop. We parked. Blaze out. Katniss harness. Echo secure. The trail stayed near shoreline. Pet-friendly. Easy. Blaze moved ahead. Katniss slower. Water calm. No camera yet. At first bend, I found another arrangement. This one made me stop. Not because it was strange. Because it was useful.

Someone had wedged three thin branches between exposed roots where trail crossed wet mud. Not enough for bridge. Enough to make one dry step. Bark laid across top. Fresh. I crouched. Mud around it had tracks. Dog. Boot. Bird. Something smaller. Nothing clear. Blaze sniffed. Then looked uphill. Katniss did same. I followed gaze. No one.

"Whoever did that, thanks."

Wind moved leaves. Nothing else. We crossed. Ten minutes farther, trail reached open bank. Light on water. Reeds. Distant old boathouse. Camera. First frame. Boathouse too central. Second. Reeds foreground. Better. Then a canoe crossed far distance. Red. I could not tell if red. Probably red. Color problem.

"Bright."

Good enough. I waited until canoe entered gap between reeds and boathouse. Click. Keeper. Simple. I took one more. Not better. Done. Back at van, Echo got out time. Divider up. Katniss separated. Blaze positioned. Echo hand. Shoulder. Head.

"No."

He stayed. I moved him. He complained.

"You have enclosure."

He complained louder.

"Also shoulders."

Three notes. Better. Then the other call. Pause. From forest: answer. Closer than road. Echo froze. Head tilted. Call again. Answer. Blaze stood. Katniss, behind divider, moved toward window. I watched tree line. Nothing. Then one branch bent. Not wind. Something moved behind trunk. Dark. Upright? No. Too fast. I stepped closer to door. Nothing. Blaze stayed loose. No growl.

Good. Echo called again. No answer this time. I ended out time after few minutes. Not fear. Enough. Divider down. Katniss immediately went to window. She stared at same tree line. Then tail flick. Interesting. We stayed for lunch. Nothing else happened. Which was disappointing. I did not admit that. Road after lake climbed. Clouds thickened. I drove.

At one point, a plastic grocery bag rolled across road. I laughed.

"Not everything."

Blaze looked up.

"Important lesson."

Later, I stopped for fuel. While pump ran, I noticed something tucked under rear bumper. Piece of bark. Not stuck naturally. Placed flat. I pulled it free. Behind it: blue bottle cap. I stood still. Same scratch. Same dent.

"No."

Blaze watched through window. I looked around station. Cars. People. Nothing unusual. Cap had traveled with us. Maybe it had been caught under van from camp. Maybe bark held it there. Maybe. But it had been on dirt when we left. I had seen it. I set cap on fuel island ledge. Then changed mind. Picked it up.

Put it in cup holder.

"Evidence."

Katniss stared.

"Don't."

She touched it once. I moved it higher. We drove. Now I was irritated. Not scared. There was difference. I did not like puzzles arriving without consent. Mercer had been my fault. This one wasn't. At next town I stopped at library. So much for no archive. Library was different. Technically. I needed internet. I searched museum catalog. North River photographs.

A handful digitized. Road crews. Company office. Bridge work. Two credited photographers. Not Mercer. I zoomed mount edges. Numbers. One had pencil 4. Another 11. I sat back. There. Same general style. Not proof yet. But strong. Different photographer. Same company collection. Numbered mounts.

I wrote: Known non-Mercer company views also carry pencil numbers. Supports company-side numbering/cataloging. That changed Mercer significantly. Those 6, 14, 17, 22 numbers likely did not belong to Mercer's personal sequence. They probably belonged to whoever organized company photographs. Probably. I searched more. One credited local studio view. Pencil 9. Another. Different photographer. Pencil 27.

Good. Now stronger. I wrote: Mount numbering appears across work by multiple photographers. Likely company/archive sequence, not photographer sequence. Not absolute. Likely. That removed one false path. Strangely satisfying. Mercer became smaller. More specific. Photographer of views. Commercial. Traveling. Possible company supplier. But numbers were not identity trail. Fine.

I wrote next question: Can any numbered company view be matched to surviving voucher date or order description? There. Still alive. Outside, rain started lightly. I sat in van. Blue bottle cap in cup holder. Echo looked at it.

"No."

He climbed closer.

"No."

He reached through enclosure bars with beak.

"No."

I moved cap to dashboard. Katniss looked.

"No."

Blaze looked.

"You're fine."

Good. Rain passed. We drove. Late afternoon. Roadside pullout with old wooden fence and wet grass. Nothing. Then sunlight hit only one puddle. Camera. I walked fifty feet. The puddle held sky. Fence reflection. Cloud. First frame. Too much road. Lower. Better. Wait. Sun moved. Fence post reflection dark against bright water. Click. Keeper. No mystery. Good. At camp, I checked blue cap. Still dashboard.

Excellent. Set camp. Blaze out. Katniss out. Echo secure. Near picnic table, I saw something. Twisted twine. Small loop. Same kind as previous picnic area. Maybe. Could be common. Probably was. I ignored it. Then Katniss walked toward brush. Stopped. Low sound. Not hiss. Not growl. Curious. Blaze joined. Both stared. I stepped closer. Brush moved. Something came halfway into view.

Dark fur. Long arm. Then gone. I froze. Not raccoon. Too tall. Maybe person crouching? No. Too small. I moved one step. Blaze remained relaxed.

"Hello?"

Nothing. That felt ridiculous. I waited. A soft scrape. Then two notes. Not Echo. Behind me, Echo answered from enclosure. I turned. Then back. Nothing. Good. Very good. I did not follow. Important. Instead: animals inside. Doors. Routine. Not panic. Just caution. After dinner, I wrote.

First: Company mount numbers likely catalog numbers, not Mercer sequence. Supported by numbered photographs credited to other photographers. Good. Then: Blue bottle cap from prior campsite apparently traveled with van. Found under rear bumper with bark. Possible accidental carry. Possible. Then stopped. What did I write about thing in brush? I thought.

Finally: Saw unidentified animal briefly at campsite edge. Dark fur. Size unclear. Movement unusual. Did not pursue. Good. Then: Blaze and Katniss curious, not alarmed. Echo exchanged call again. Enough. I did not write long arm. Because I wasn't sure. Memory changed fast when frightened. I wasn't frightened. Still. Today's photograph: Rain puddle / fence reflection / brief sun. Keeper.

Good. I closed notebook. Blue bottle cap sat beside it. I looked at cap. Then Mercer envelope. Then door.

"One mystery at a time."

Echo gave bad whistle.

"Thank you."

I put cap in small zip pocket of backpack. Not because important. Because I wanted to know where it was. Lights out. Ten minutes later: two soft taps against side of van. Low. I opened eyes. Blaze lifted head. Katniss stood. Echo made no sound. Tap. Pause. Tap. I did not open door. Good. Then something slid lightly across metal step outside.

A small sound. Then quiet. I waited. Five minutes. Nothing. Eventually I slept. In morning, there was a pine cone on the step. Centered. Perfectly.

CHAPTER 55

A Pattern That Wasn’t Mine

The pine cone stayed on the step until breakfast. I did not touch it. That became a problem. Not a practical one. A thinking one. Coffee first. Then problem. Blaze sniffed it. Katniss watched from doorway. Echo climbed down toward food. Nobody reacted. Good.

I crouched beside step. Pine cone. Centered. No twine. No bark. No obvious reason. I looked around camp. Nothing moved.

“Fine.”

I picked it up. Dry. Fresh enough. Not chewed. Not remarkable. I put it on picnic table. Then immediately regretted that. Now I had moved it. Evidence ruined.

“Excellent.”

Blaze looked away. I drank coffee. Mercer stayed closed. For twenty-three minutes. Then not. I took out yesterday’s notes. Company numbering. Multiple photographers. Numbered mounts. Good. That had simplified one thing. It also made another thing worse.

If the numbers belonged to company filing instead of Mercer, then the mount numbers weren’t helping identify Mercer. Which meant I was back to routes, clients, dates, and payments. I wrote: Mount numbers probably archive-side. Stop leaning on them. Good. Then added: Find descriptions tied to voucher 1847. Still useful. Then I noticed something.

The newspaper clipping about Mercer offering views sat behind the company ledger notes. Not where I had put it. Again. I stared. Cabinet closed. Envelope clipped. Katniss could not have opened it. Blaze definitely could not. Echo was physically separate. So either I had done it. Or memory had. Both likely. I left it. That was becoming easier.

Road. We left after eight. Cloud cover. Cool. Good driving. Echo quiet. Katniss passenger seat. Blaze awake. At first pullout, I checked rear bumper. No bottle cap. No bark. Good. At second pullout, Blaze found something interesting in brush. Nose low. Tail neutral. Katniss followed. I stopped them before they pushed farther.

“No.”

Blaze looked back. Katniss did not. Something moved beyond brush. Dark. Low. Gone. Same kind of movement. I waited. No sound. Echo, inside van, made two-part call. Answer came from woods. Closer than before. I looked at Blaze. No tension. That mattered more every time.

"Friend?"

Blaze blinked.

"Useful."

We continued. The road crossed a narrow bridge. Old timber railings. Modern deck. I almost stopped. Did not. Not every old-new contrast required photograph. Ten minutes later, something did. A line of utility poles crossed harvested field. One pole leaned slightly. Cloud shadow moved behind. I stopped. Camera. First frame too flat. Wait. Wind bent grass. One opening in cloud lit only far end of field.

Poles led toward it. Click. Keeper. Simple. Back in van, Echo watched me.

"Yes. Pole."

Bad whistle.

"Critic."

Around noon, we stopped at a state recreation area. Pet-friendly loop. Tables. Restrooms. Trees. Normal. I walked perimeter. Habit. Behind one table: nothing. Behind next: nothing. Third: something. A short strip of cloth. Gray. Frayed. Caught in low branch. Could have blown there. Below it: two sticks crossed. One small flat stone. I stared. Too simple to mean anything.

Still. The cloth had been wrapped once around branch before trailing loose. Not knot. Just caught. I did not touch it. Blaze sniffed. Then looked uphill. Katniss did same. Echo called. Answer. Three seconds later, another answer. Different place. I frowned. Could be two birds. Probably. Echo repeated. Only one answer this time. I looked between trunks. Nothing.

Then something moved upright for half second. Not human height. Not even close. But upright. Then dropped low and disappeared. I froze. I knew what I saw. Probably. Dark body. Longer than expected. Two legs. Then four. No. I did not trust that. Movement could trick distance. Branches could split outline. I wrote nothing yet. Important. We stayed.

That mattered too. No panic. No chase. No dramatic retreat. Lunch. Echo secure. Blaze near bench. Katniss on harness. I ate sandwich. Something rustled uphill again. Blaze looked. Tail still neutral. Katniss crouched slightly. Curious. No growl. No hiss. Good. Then a small object rolled out from brush. Not toward us exactly. Down slope. Blue bottle cap. I stopped chewing.

Same color. Scuffed. No. I had put previous one in backpack. I checked. Still there. So this was another. I laughed. Once.

"Of course."

Katniss walked toward it.

"No."

She stopped. I got up. Cap had rolled against tree root. Different scratch. Different dent. Not same. That was almost comforting. Then I noticed something else. Beside root: small arrangement of bark pieces. Three. Graduated size. Largest at bottom. Cap had stopped exactly beside them. Wind? Slope? Maybe. I left it. Good. We finished lunch. Before leaving, I looked uphill one more time.

Nothing. Back on road. I thought about upright movement. Then did not. Mercer was easier. At next town, I stopped at historical society. Not archive. Display room. Technically lighter. Front desk volunteer named Marjorie. I asked whether they had any material related to North River Improvement Company. She said: "Too much." Good sign. Mostly copied material. Photographs. Advertisements. Maps.

I asked about company vouchers. She did not have them. Then I showed date and number. Voucher 1847. She frowned.

"That sounds familiar."

Dangerous. She went into back room. Returned with binder. Not original records. An old volunteer transcription project from twenty years ago. Someone had indexed selected company entries. I stopped breathing. Metaphorically. Marjorie flipped. 1840s. There. No. 1847 — E.M. — views / mounts — 15.00 I stared. E.M. Marjorie looked at me.

"That mean something?"

"Maybe."

Good answer. My notes: Mercer. E. Mercer. Photographer of views. Company ledger: photographic views. Voucher 1847. Now transcription: E.M. Could be Mercer. Could be another person with initials E.M. Could be transcription error. Could be shorthand. I asked source.

Volunteer had transcribed from original voucher register, not voucher wrapper. Register apparently no longer onsite. Maybe county collection.

"Can I see who did transcription?"

Binder front. Harold Pike. Notes said uncertain letters marked with question mark. E.M. had no question mark. Interesting. Not proof. Stronger. I photographed binder page with phone for reference after permission. Not art. Then wrote: Voucher 1847 may name payee initials E.M. If accurate, strongest company-Mercer link yet. Need original register. There. Do not celebrate.

Marjorie smiled.

"You look like you're trying not to be happy."

"Professional restraint."

"Are you professional?"

"No."

She laughed. Good. I asked whether any photos had labels matching voucher period. She found box of reproduced company views. Road. Bridge. Mill. Camp. Residence. Same categories as Mercer ad. Some credited. Some not. One uncredited view had mount number 17. I had a Mercer photo with maybe 17. No.

Could be duplicate series. Could be same subject. Could be company-assigned. Already established. I did not overreact. Then I looked closer. Same bridge. Different angle. My Mercer photo showed ferry approach from downstream. This one showed same structure from upstream. Maybe. I compared landmarks. Hill line. Tree break. Building roof. Likely same place. Interesting. If Mercer worked assignment, multiple views of same improvement made sense.

I wrote: Company has uncredited alternate view of probable same bridge/ferry approach as Mercer image. Could indicate commissioned set. Compare carefully later. Good. Not answer. Closer. I left after an hour. Outside, sunlight returned. No photograph. Good. At van, Echo greeted with bad whistle. I answered badly. Katniss stepped over notebook. Blaze wanted walk. Correct priorities. We drove another forty miles.

Late light. Road curved beside wet meadow. A snag stood alone. Clouds behind. I slowed. Too dramatic. Kept going. Five minutes later: old fence corner. Nothing special. Then bird landed on post. Not rare. Not impressive. But shadow from fence made diagonal across pale grass. Camera. I waited. Bird stayed. Cloud moved. Light softened. Click. Keeper. Bird left immediately after.

Good timing. At camp, routine. Before doors opened, I checked ground. Nothing. Blaze out. Katniss out. Echo secure. No strange arrangement. Good. I almost felt disappointed. That was stupid. Dinner. Echo out later. Divider. Shoulder. Hand. Perch. Two-part call. Answer from dark. Same distance. Then another sound. Not call. Scrape. I looked. Something stood beyond edge of light.

Not fully visible. Upright. Small. Maybe three feet? Hard to judge. Dark fur. Large outline at head. Ears? Then dropped to all fours and moved sideways through brush. Fast. I froze. Blaze watched. No growl. Katniss crouched. No hiss. Echo leaned toward it. I whispered: "Well." Nothing. Then from dark: two notes. Echo answered. I did not. Good.

I ended out time. Not because danger. Because enough. Inside. Divider down after Echo secure. Katniss went to window. Blaze lay near door. I sat. For first time, I wrote it plainly. Unknown animal observed clearly enough to confirm unusual movement. Dark fur. Approximately small-dog size upright, lower on all fours. Moved both ways naturally. Large ears or head silhouette. Did not approach.

I paused. Then: Blaze and Katniss alert but not fearful. Echo appears to exchange simple calls with it. Good. Then Mercer: Voucher 1847 transcription lists E.M. — views / mounts — $15.00. Need original register before treating as Mercer.

Then: Possible alternate company view of same bridge/ferry approach as one Mercer photograph. Good. Then today's camera photographs: Utility poles / harvested field / light at far end. Keeper. Fence corner / bird on post / diagonal shadow. Keeper. Two. Fine. I closed notebook. No paper shifted. Good. Outside, brush moved once. Then stopped. I waited. Nothing. A minute later, something touched van step. Soft.

Not tap. Placement. I did not move. Then retreat. Quick. I waited five minutes. Door stayed closed. Good. Eventually I checked through window. On step: a strip of gray cloth. Frayed. Same kind as picnic area. Maybe same piece. Folded once. On top: one flat stone. I stared. Not gift. Maybe. Not threat. Probably. Not random. That part I was willing to admit.

I left it outside. For now.

CHAPTER 56

A Word I Couldn’t Use Yet

The gray cloth stayed outside overnight. So did the stone. Morning moved around them. Birds. Wind. Light. Nothing touched either. I waited longer than necessary before opening door. Blaze went first. Normal. Katniss followed. Less normal. She walked straight to edge of campsite. Not cloth. Not stone. Brush. She sat. Blaze sniffed near step. Then cloth. Then past it.

Toward same brush.

“Fine.”

Echo called from enclosure. Two notes. From trees: answer. I looked up. Nothing. Again. Echo. Answer. Then silence. This was becoming a conversation. Not mine. Coffee. I left cloth where it was. Breakfast. Nectar. Cleaning. Mercer stayed in cabinet. For once. I wanted one morning where nothing needed organizing. The world objected. Something clicked against underside of table.

I looked. Blue bottle cap. Not mine. Different one again. Scuffed. Flattened slightly. I stared.

“You’re kidding.”

Blaze sniffed. Katniss batted it once.

“No.”

She looked offended. I picked it up. Different scratches. Different cap. So now there were two. One in backpack. One in hand. This was getting stupid. I put second cap on table beside pine cone. Then stopped. Pine cone. Cap. Gray cloth. Flat stone. Different objects. Same pattern. Collected. Moved. Placed. Not random. I admitted that much. Not yet why.

We left late. I wanted to see if anything changed after we were gone. Which was impossible. Unless I came back. I considered it. Then laughed.

“No.”

Road. The morning stayed cool. Blaze awake. Katniss watching roadside. Echo moving between perches. At a long straight stretch, something ran parallel to van inside tree line. Not continuously. Three glimpses. Dark shape. Then nothing. Then movement farther ahead. Too fast to identify. I slowed. Blaze stood. Katniss climbed onto seat back. Echo went quiet. That silence bothered me more than noise.

Then shape crossed a gap. Upright. Definitely. Small. Long arms. Then dropped low and disappeared behind brush. I said nothing. Because saying something would make it more real. Five seconds later: "Well." Good enough. Blaze's tail moved once. Not wagging. Not stiff. Curious. Katniss remained focused. Echo made two-note call. No answer. We continued. At next safe turnout, I stopped.

Not because I expected anything. Because I wanted to check animals. All normal. I checked road behind. Nothing. Then ground beside rear tire. Three sticks. Parallel. Not touching. I stared. Could have been there. Probably had been. I kicked one accidentally. Then felt annoyed. At myself. Why did that matter? I moved it back approximately. Then stopped.

"No."

I left all three. This was ridiculous. We walked. Katniss led toward low brush. Blaze followed. I kept both close. Then I heard it. Not bird. Not animal call exactly. A sound with shape. Two syllables. Maybe three. Soft. From somewhere ahead. I froze. Echo answered from van behind us. Same two-part pattern. The sound came again.

Different. Longer. Almost voice. I looked at Blaze. He heard it. No alarm. Katniss definitely heard it. She stared. I said: "Hello?" Silence. Then: something moved. Not close. Dark. Upright behind branches. I could see head shape. Large pointed ears. Then gone. No. I stood still. Five seconds. Ten. Nothing.

"All right."

No answer. We went back to van. I did not follow. Good. An hour later, I found small town. Gas. Groceries. No archive. Strong day. At store, I bought fruit. Nectar supplies. Dog food. Cat food. Coffee. And binder clips. Mercer won anyway. Outside, Echo called while I loaded groceries. Two notes. From tree line beyond lot: answer.

I looked. Nothing. An older man loading truck beside me looked too.

"You hear that?" I asked.

He shrugged.

"Bird."

"Probably."

He looked at Echo.

"That yours?"

"Apparently."

Echo yelled. The man laughed.

"Yeah."

Good. We drove. Around noon, road reached river again. I stopped at small county park. Blaze out. Katniss harness. Echo secure. Picnic tables. Water. Cottonwoods. Normal. Except near one tree: a crude little pouch. I stopped. Not store-bought. Not close. Piece of old fabric. Twisted cord. One strap. Rough. Small. It hung from low branch. I did not touch it.

This was different. Human-made. Or human-like. Could belong to child. Camper. Hiker. But nobody nearby. The stitching was irregular. Not machine. Maybe tied rather than sewn. I crouched. Blaze sniffed air. Katniss watched tree line. The pouch had bits of bark caught in it. Leaves. Dry grass. Not decoration. Wear. Use. I backed away.

"Not ours."

Good rule. We walked opposite direction. Twenty minutes later, pouch was gone. I stopped. Branch empty. No person. No car. Nothing.

"Okay."

Blaze looked toward trees. Same direction. I waited. A shape moved. Upright. Closer. Maybe thirty yards. Dark fur. Long torso. Long arms. Large pointed ears. Then it stepped behind trunk. Not ran. Stepped. I saw hand around bark. Hand. Not paw. Long fingers. I stopped breathing. Again metaphorically. Mostly.

"Hello?"

The hand disappeared. Silence. Then one word. Maybe. Not English. Soft. I couldn't repeat it if I tried. Then movement low through brush. Fast. Gone. Blaze did not chase. Important. Katniss pulled once.

"No."

She stopped. Echo called from van. Answer came from farther away. I stood there another minute. Then left. No pursuit. Good. Back in van, I wrote immediately. Not Mercer. Observed unknown creature more clearly. Dark fur. Moves upright and on all fours. Long arms. Large pointed ears. Hands/fingers visible. Appears intelligent enough to carry or make crude pouch. Vocalized one unfamiliar word/sound. Did not approach aggressively.

I stared. Creature. That word felt wrong. Animal felt wrong too. Person? Too much. I crossed out creature. Wrote: individual Better. Maybe. Then: Do not follow. Do not corner. Let it choose distance. Good. That mattered. We drove another hour. My mind did not. It stayed thirty yards behind. At tree. With hand. Long fingers. Not raccoon. Good.

By afternoon, clouds broke. I saw old barn roof through trees. Camera. No. Too distracted. Kept going. Later, road crossed open flats. Wind strong. A discarded plastic bag caught on fence. I almost stopped. Then laughed.

“Not everything.”

Echo bad-whistled.

“Exactly.”

At next pullout, I did stop. Not for mystery. For light. A narrow creek ran through dark grass. Clouds opened only above water. The creek became silver. Everything else stayed muted. Camera. First frame. Too wide. Second. Creek entering lower corner. Wait. Wind moved grass one direction. Water caught opposite light. Click. Keeper. Good. Mine. We continued. Camp before dark.

More open than previous night. Fewer trees. Better visibility. Intentional. Not fear. Preference. Blaze out. Katniss out. Echo secure. I walked perimeter. Nothing unusual. Good. Then near picnic table: three small objects. Acorn cap. Piece of bark. Blue bottle cap. In line. I stopped. No. The cap had white scratch across top. Mine? I checked backpack. Original cap still inside.

So not. Another. How many blue bottle caps existed in this region? Enough to irritate me. I left arrangement. Dinner. Echo out behind divider. Hand. Shoulder. Perch. He made two-note call. No answer. Again. Nothing. He looked toward horizon. Then something moved beyond campground edge. Dark. Upright. Stopped. Far enough I could not see details. But I knew shape now.

I stayed still. Blaze saw it. No growl. Katniss watched. Echo gave two notes. The figure answered. Then another sound. Longer. Almost a phrase. I listened. One word repeated. Same word from tree earlier. I tried to imitate it. Badly. Figure froze. Then made quick sound. Not angry. Maybe startled. I tried again. Worse. Echo screamed.

“Helpful.”

The figure moved. Not away immediately. One step closer. Then stopped. I could see ears. Head. Shoulders. Long arms. Something slung across body. The pouch. Good. I raised one hand. Slow.

“Hello.”

No answer. Then I pointed at myself.

“Bone.”

That felt absurd. The figure tilted head.

“Bone.” I repeated.

A pause. Then from dark: “Bo...” Close. I froze.

“Bone.”

“Bone.”

Clearer. Well. That changed everything. I pointed toward Echo.

“Echo.”

Echo yelled. The figure made a sound. Not Echo. Something else. Then tried: “E...ko.”

“Close enough.”

Blaze stood beside me. I pointed.

“Blaze.”

The figure watched.

“Bla...”

Then stopped. Katniss behind divider.

“Katniss.”

Nothing. Fair. I did not move closer. Neither did figure. Then I pointed gently toward them.

“Name?”

Silence. I tried again.

“Your name?”

The figure said something. Several sounds. Quick. Layered. I heard maybe four syllables. Maybe six. I could not separate them. I tried repeating. Badly. Very badly. The figure stared. Then covered face with both hands. I laughed.

“That bad?”

Hands lowered. Big eyes caught last light. Amber. Gold. Not afraid. Maybe amused. Maybe horrified. I pointed to them again.

“Name?”

Same word. Slower. Still impossible. I tried. Worse. The figure made a sound that might have been laughter. Good. Then stepped backward. I did not stop them.

“Okay.”

They paused. I pointed at myself again.

“Bone.”

“Bone.”

Good. Then figure pointed toward Echo.

“Echo.”

Almost right. Then toward Blaze.

“Blaze.”

Better. Then toward Katniss. Long pause.

“Kat...”

Close enough. Katniss stared. Then figure pointed at themselves. Said their name. Still impossible. I shook head gently.

“Sorry.”

I tapped my own chest. “Bone.” Then pointed toward them. “Can I call you something else?” Blank look. Too many words. I tried simpler.

“Other name?”

Nothing.

“Short name?”

Head tilt. I pointed. “Name. Short.” The figure thought. Actually thought. That mattered. Then: “Some...” Pause.

“Call...”

Another pause.

“Tangle.”

I froze.

“Tangle?”

The figure touched fingers together. Twisted them. Then pointed toward little line of objects near table.

“Tangle.”

They seemed to test word. Then again: “Tangle.” I smiled.

“You like that?”

Too much. I pointed to them. “Tangle?” Then gave thumbs-up. Question. The figure watched gesture. Then copied it. Wrong angle. Close enough.

“Tangle.”

Good.

“Tangle it is.”

The figure did not understand sentence. Didn’t matter. Echo gave bad whistle. Tangle looked at him. Then reproduced it almost perfectly. I stared.

“No.”

Echo did it again. Tangle copied. Blaze looked between them. Katniss sat. This was going badly. Or very well. Hard to tell. Tangle stepped closer by maybe two feet. Still outside campground edge. I did not move. Then they pointed at blue bottle cap arrangement.

“Mine.”

I looked at cap.

"You?"

Tangle nodded. Then pointed toward my backpack. I understood. Maybe. I pulled out original blue cap. Tangle's eyes widened. Then: "Ah." One word. Perfectly clear.

"You put this on van?"

Too many words. I pointed at cap. Then van. Then Tangle. Tangle nodded. I laughed.

"Of course."

They pointed toward brush. Then made walking motion with fingers. Then toward road. Following.

"You've been following us."

Tangle nodded at tone more than words. Blaze walked one step forward. Tangle crouched instantly. Not frightened. Ready. Blaze stopped. I said: "Blaze. Stay." He stayed. Tangle watched him. Then slowly stood. Good. No touching. No introductions closer than needed. Enough. I pointed to camp. Then ground. Then Tangle.

"Stay?"

Tangle looked at dark beyond camp. Then at us. Then shook head.

"No."

Clear. Good.

"Okay."

Tangle repeated: "Okay." Then smiled. At least I think. Their face did something unfamiliar. But not threatening. They stepped backward. Echo called. Tangle answered. Then dropped to all fours. Moved fast into brush. Gone. Just like that. I stood for a long time. Blaze sat. Katniss kept staring after them. Echo whistled.

"Yes."

I ended out time. Divider down once Echo secure. Then I sat at table. Notebook. For several minutes I wrote nothing. Then: Name: Tangle. I stopped. That looked ridiculous. Then: Actual name unknown / unable to pronounce. Tangle appears to be accepted nickname. Speaks some English. Understands more than first assumed. Highly intelligent. Deliberately arranged objects. Has been following us.

Then: No aggression observed. Maintains distance. Blaze/Katniss curious, not fearful. Echo has established call exchange. Then: Do not push. Let Tangle choose contact. Good. Mercer envelope sat unopened. For first time in weeks, I did not care. Outside, darkness settled. Two notes came from far brush. Echo answered. I smiled.

"Tangle."

The word fit. Not because I had named them. Because they had offered it.

CHAPTER 57

The Distance We Kept

Morning began with nothing on the step. I checked twice. Apparently I had developed expectations. That was concerning. Blaze went out first. Katniss followed. Echo climbed toward breakfast. No pine cone. No bottle cap. No gray cloth. No mysterious collection of forest debris arranged according to rules I did not understand. Just dirt.

"Disappointing."

Blaze looked at me.

"I didn't say that."

Coffee. Breakfast. Nectar. Cleaning. Then notebook. I opened to last night's page. Name: Tangle. Still strange. Below it: Actual name unknown / unable to pronounce. Tangle appears to be accepted nickname. Speaks some English. Understands more than first assumed. Highly intelligent. Deliberately arranged objects. Has been following us. I reread highly intelligent. Maybe too early.

Then remembered the pouch. The calls. The objects. The fact that Tangle had listened to four names and reproduced three of them within minutes. No. Keep it. I added: Moves primarily upright when stationary or communicating. Drops to all fours for speed / brush / uneven ground. Good.

Then: Approximate size: difficult to judge. Roughly 30 pounds? Upright perhaps 3–3½ feet. Question marks. Important. Then I stopped. There were obvious blanks. Species. Origin. Age. Sex. Gender. I stared at page. Species: No idea. Origin: No idea. Age: Completely meaningless without context. Then I wrote: Gender: unknown. Not relevant. Good. That was enough. I crossed out the empty headings I hadn't filled.

This was a person. Not inventory. I closed notebook. Road. We drove two hours before anything unusual happened. Which felt unusually long. Echo made the two-note call twice. No answer. Katniss watched tree lines. Blaze mostly slept. I started wondering if Tangle had stayed behind. That should have been reassuring. It wasn't. Interesting. At a roadside stop, I walked Blaze. Katniss came too.

Nothing. At the far edge of parking area, I saw three sticks laid against a curb. I ignored them. Probably sticks. Good. Then Blaze walked directly over and sniffed. Under one stick: blue bottle cap. I stared.

"Of course."

Katniss sat beside it. I picked it up. Different again.

"Does Tangle own a bottling plant?"

Blaze sneezed. Possible. I left cap where it was. Then looked toward trees. Nothing.

"Morning."

Saying it felt ridiculous. No answer. We left. An hour later, Echo answered a call I had not heard. I looked over. He leaned toward passenger side. Two notes. From somewhere outside: two notes. Then another sound.

"Bone."

I nearly drove off road. Not really. But close enough internally. I slowed.

"Bone."

The voice came from tree line. Faint. Katniss stood. Blaze lifted head. I found safe pullout fifty yards ahead. Park. Engine off. Silence. Then: "Bone." I stepped outside. Blaze beside me. Katniss stayed inside this time. Echo secure.

"Tangle?"

Brush moved. Nothing emerged. Then one hand appeared around trunk. Long fingers. A face followed. Amber eyes. Large ears. Dark fur. Tangle. They stood upright behind tree. Not hiding exactly. Keeping distance.

"Morning."

Blank look. I pointed at sky. Then myself. "Morning." Tangle considered.

"Morning."

Good. Then: "Bone."

"Yes."

Tangle pointed toward van.

"Echo."

Echo screamed. Tangle flinched. I laughed.

"Also yes."

Tangle pointed lower.

"Blaze."

Blaze stood beside me. Then toward passenger window.

"Kat..."

"Katniss."

Tangle tried.

"Kat-niss."

Good enough. Katniss stared through glass. Tangle stared back. Neither seemed impressed. Then Tangle stepped from behind tree. Full daylight helped. Dark fur. Not uniformly dark. Bits of bark. Dry grass. Tiny leaves. At first I thought debris had simply caught. Then I noticed placement.

Some tucked beneath longer fur. Some pressed along shoulder. A small twig angled against upper back. Deliberate. Camouflage. Not decoration. Interesting. The pouch crossed chest on one rough strap. Smaller than it had looked from distance. Old material. Patched. Uneven. Definitely not store-bought. Good. Tangle also carried something. A stick. No. Staff.

Twisted juniper. About their height. Gnarled knot near top. Scraped smooth where hand held it. Practical. Tangle planted it.

"Walk."

I blinked.

"Walk?"

Tangle nodded. Then pointed at road. Then at us.

"Walk."

I looked at Blaze.

"Apparently we have plans."

Tangle waited. I opened van. Katniss harness. Blaze leash. Echo stayed secure. Tangle watched every step. Especially Katniss. When she came down, Tangle moved back two paces. Katniss stared. Tail neutral. Good. We started along short gravel path beside pullout. Tangle stayed ten feet away. Then eight. Then twelve. Distance changed depending on brush. Mostly upright. Staff in one hand. Pouch at side.

When trail narrowed around fallen branches, Tangle dropped smoothly to all fours. Staff went briefly across back beneath strap. Then upright again. Efficient. Not performance. Blaze kept glancing over. Eventually he drifted closer. Tangle stopped. Blaze stopped. They looked at each other. I waited. Tangle slowly held out hand. Not toward Blaze. Just low. Blaze sniffed air. One step.

Tangle stayed still. Another. Blaze sniffed fingers. Then moved on. That was it. No petting. No instant friendship. Good. Tangle looked at me.

“Blaze.”

“Yes.”

Then pointed at dog. “Big.” I laughed.

“Very.”

Tangle nodded seriously.

“Very.”

Good word. Katniss maintained more distance. Tangle seemed to understand that too. No reaching. No following. Good. We reached small creek. Water crossed trail. Not deep. There were stones. Tangle stopped. Looked at stones. Looked upstream. Then picked up one piece of bark. Placed it between two rocks. I stared. Of course. Tangle tested it with staff. Stable.

Then stepped across. I stood there. The little arrangements. The bark. The stones. The dry steps.

“Tangle.”

They looked back. I pointed to bark. Then repeated: “You.” Tangle tilted head. I pointed behind us. Back toward places we had passed over days. Then bark. Then Tangle.

“You?”

Understanding came slowly. Tangle smiled. Maybe.

“Fix.”

One word. I laughed.

“Fix.”

Tangle nodded.

“Was bad.”

They pointed at creek crossing.

“Now... less bad.”

That was excellent.

“That may be your philosophy.”

Nothing. Too many words. I pointed at bark. Thumbs-up. Tangle copied gesture. Correct angle this time. Progress. We continued. At a sunny patch, Tangle stopped suddenly. Head tilted. Katniss also stopped. Both looked toward grass. Mouse maybe. Tangle pointed.

“Food.”

Katniss crouched.

“No.”

Tangle looked at me. Then Katniss.

“Food?”

"Not for us."

I pointed to Katniss. Then grass. Then shook head. Tangle thought. Then: "Kat food." I considered.

"Technically."

Too much. I shook head.

"No."

Tangle accepted this. Katniss did not. We turned back. At van, Tangle did not approach door. Stopped at edge of gravel. Good. I offered water. Cup. Set on ground halfway between. Tangle stared at cup. Then me.

"Water."

They knew word.

"Water."

Tangle approached only after I backed away. Drank. Not like animal. Picked cup up. Hands. Long fingers. Careful. Then examined cup itself. Cheap collapsible silicone. Apparently fascinating. Tangle bent it. Released. Bent again.

"Please don't improve that."

Blank look. I pointed. "Mine." Tangle immediately stopped. Then held it out. Interesting.

"Thank you."

Tangle repeated softly: "Thank."

"Thank you."

"Thank... you."

Good. I gave them dried fruit. Small amount. Tangle smelled it. Looked at Echo. Then me.

"Echo food?"

"Some."

I nodded. Tangle ate. Apparently acceptable. Then pointed at Blaze's food bag.

"No."

Tangle looked at Blaze.

"Blaze food."

"Yes."

Then Katniss bag.

"Kat-niss food."

"Yes."

Then my sandwich. Tangle pointed.

"Bone food."

I looked at sandwich.

"Apparently."

Tangle smiled again. Definitely this time. Then they looked inside open side door. Not entered. Just looked. Echo enclosure. Cabinet. Bench. Table. Mercer envelope was barely visible through cabinet gap. Tangle's eyes stopped there. Not long. Just noticed. Then looked away. Good. Not yet. I closed cabinet. Tangle watched latch. Then looked at latch longer than necessary.

"No."

Tangle looked at me. I pointed at cabinet. "Mine." Tangle nodded.

"Mine."

Good. Boundaries. Then Tangle touched own pouch.

"Mine."

"Exactly."

That landed. Tangle looked pleased. Echo gave two-note call. Tangle answered. Then pointed at Echo.

"Talk."

I looked at bird.

"He definitely thinks so."

Tangle didn't understand. I pointed at Echo. "Talk." Then at Tangle. "Talk." Then myself. "Talk." Tangle nodded.

"Bone... talk many."

I stared. Blaze looked at me. Katniss looked at me. Echo whistled.

"Unnecessary consensus."

Tangle did not understand words. But laughed anyway. We stayed almost an hour. No pressure. Tangle moved in and out of distance. Sometimes near enough to speak. Sometimes twenty yards away gathering something. Leaves. Twig. Burr. I watched them work debris into fur. Deliberately. A leaf pressed along shoulder. Small bark piece tucked near side. Camouflage confirmed.

"That's intentional."

Tangle looked up. I pointed to fur. Leaves. Then surrounding brush. Tangle nodded.

"Hide."

There. Simple.

"Smart."

Tangle tilted head.

"Smart." I tapped temple. Then pointed at them.

Tangle considered. Then pointed at me. "Smart." I laughed.

"Debatable."

Eventually Tangle picked up staff.

"Go."

"You leaving?"

Tangle pointed toward trees. "Go." Then pointed toward road ahead. "Bone go."

"Yes."

Tangle pointed at self. Then road. Then made walking fingers.

"Follow?"

Tangle nodded. Ah.

"You've been following us."

They probably didn't understand whole sentence. I simplified. "You follow Bone?"

"Follow."

"Why?"

Blank. I pointed at myself. Then Tangle. "Why follow?" Tangle looked toward Blaze. Then Katniss. Then Echo. Then at me.

"Interesting."

I stared. Fair.

"That's uncomfortable."

No understanding. Good. Tangle stepped backward. Then paused.

"Bone."

"Yeah?"

Tangle pointed at van. Then down road.

"Bone go."

"Yes."

Then pointed at self.

"Tangle... maybe."

I smiled.

"Maybe."

Tangle copied: "Maybe." Then dropped to all fours and disappeared through brush. Fast. Blaze watched. Katniss watched. Echo called once. Answer came farther away. We drove twenty minutes later. I did not look for Tangle. Much. Afternoon opened into rolling fields. Camera beside me. I stopped near abandoned windmill. Not because Tangle. Not

because Mercer. Because clouds behind it were building into clean layers.

I walked farther than first composition. Windmill silhouette against cloud was too obvious. Moved left. Fence line entered. Better. Waited. One patch of light crossed field but missed windmill. Good. Click. Keeper. Mine. Back in van, I opened notebook. Not while driving. Good. Added: Tangle appeared voluntarily this morning. Walked with us approximately one hour. Then: Uses staff. Handmade pouch. Natural debris in fur is deliberately arranged camouflage.

Then: English limited but expanding quickly. Understands possession/boundaries: "mine." Then: Blaze made first close contact. Calm. Katniss maintains more distance. Then: Tangle responsible for at least some bark/stick arrangements seen along route. Says "fix" / "was bad" / "less bad." I smiled at that. Then: Reason for following: "interesting." I looked at animals.

"Apparently we're interesting."

Echo yelled.

"You're doing most of work."

Bad whistle. Then I added one last line: Do not assume following means joining. Important. Tangle had a life before us. Somewhere. A name I couldn't pronounce. People who had called them something else. A pouch. A staff. A language. Knowledge.

None of that belonged to me just because Tangle had stepped close enough to talk. I closed notebook. Mercer envelope remained in cabinet. Untouched. For now. At camp that evening, nothing appeared on step. No pine cone. No bottle cap. No cloth. I ate dinner. Fed everyone. Cleaned enclosure. Echo got out time. Divider up. Katniss separated. Blaze positioned.

Echo called. No answer. Again. Nothing. Then from far beyond camp: "Bone." I smiled.

"Good night, Tangle."

Silence. Then: "Night." Close enough.

CHAPTER 58

What Tangle Meant by Fix

Tangle did not appear at breakfast. No call. No bottle cap. No pine cone. No gray cloth. Nothing. I was beginning to understand that absence could be deliberate too. Blaze ate. Katniss ate. Echo ate. I drank coffee. Then Echo made two notes. Far off: two notes back. There.

"Good morning."

No answer. Fine. I opened notebook. Yesterday: Tangle appeared voluntarily. Walked with us approximately one hour. Reason for following: "interesting." Still funny. I added: Does not appear to assume access to van or belongings. Responds well to simple boundary language. Then thought about cabinet. Tangle had looked at latch. Not touched. Good. Then I added: Seems curious about mechanisms.

That felt obvious. Coffee. Mercer. I resisted. Then failed. Binder clips. Newspaper copies. Voucher notes. Company catalog numbering. Alternate bridge view. The E.M. transcription bothered me. Not because it was weak. Because it was almost strong. Almost was dangerous. I wrote: Need original voucher register before calling E.M. = E. Mercer. Good. Then: Could search county payment ledger cross-reference by voucher number.

Also good. I closed it. Road first. We drove north for a while. Then west. Then eventually whichever direction looked less interesting. That helped. The morning stayed uneventful. Then Tangle appeared beside road. Not dramatically. Just there. Standing at edge of brush. Staff in hand. Pouch across chest. Bits of leaves and bark worked into fur. Watching van approach.

I slowed.

"Tangle."

They lifted one hand. I pulled into turnout. Engine off. Tangle approached closer than yesterday. Still not close.

"Bone."

"Morning."

"Morning."

Good. Echo called. Tangle answered. Blaze came out. Katniss stayed inside by choice. Tangle pointed toward road behind us.

“Bad.”

I looked.

“Road?”

Tangle shook head. Pointed lower. A drainage culvert. Water had cut small trench beside shoulder. Tangle walked toward it. I followed. Blaze too. Tangle crouched. A loose board had been laid across wash. Old. Warped. Someone had used it as step. Tangle pressed one end. Board rocked.

“Bad.”

“Yeah.”

Tangle looked around. Found flat stone. Then another. Wedged both beneath board. Pressed again. Stable.

“Fix.”

I smiled.

“Less bad?”

Tangle looked at me. Then nodded.

“Less bad.”

Good. This was going to become phrase. We crossed. A short trail led into scrub. Nothing official. Probably access path. Tangle walked upright. Staff tapping lightly. Blaze stayed close. At one point Tangle stopped. Looked down. Picked up a length of wire. Rusty. I immediately said: “No.” Tangle froze. Then looked at me. I pointed at wire. “Sharp.”

Tangle touched carefully. Then nodded.

“Sharp.”

They carried it anyway. I frowned. Tangle walked twenty feet. Then bent it around broken fence post. Pulled loose end off trail. No longer where someone could step on it.

“Fix.”

I laughed.

“Fine.”

Tangle looked pleased. Blaze sniffed repaired post.

“Inspector.”

No one understood. We continued. At a patch of brush, Katniss finally joined. Harness. She walked behind me at first. Tangle noticed. Did not approach. Good. After ten minutes Katniss moved ahead. Tangle slowed.

Let her pass. Very good. Then Katniss stopped near a bush. Focused. Tangle stopped too. Both looked beneath it. I expected mouse. Tangle said: "Small."

"Mouse?"

Blank. I mimed tiny animal. Badly. Tangle stared. Then crouched. Pointed. A lizard. Of course. Katniss wanted it.

"No."

Tangle looked at Katniss. Then me.

"Kat food?"

"No."

Tangle thought. Then: "Kat wants food."

"Yes."

That was accurate. They smiled. Good. Back at van, Echo had become loud enough to be heard through trees.

"Tangle."

Echo said something that was not Tangle. But close enough to make me stop. Tangle stopped too.

"Tan…gle."

Echo tried again. I stared at bird.

"No."

Echo repeated. Tangle laughed. Great. Now bird was naming things. Tangle approached van edge. Still did not enter. I opened side door. Echo climbed enclosure. Tangle looked closely. Not at bird first. At enclosure. Mounts. Latch. Tray. Perches. Shield. Of course. Tangle pointed at isolation mount.

"Move?"

"Little."

I pinched fingers close.

"Little."

Tangle touched air near it but not mount. Then looked underneath.

"Why?"

That one surprised me.

"Road shakes."

I mimed vibration with hand. Tangle watched. Then pointed at Echo.

"Less shake."

"Exactly."

Tangle nodded. Then looked at tray. Pulled it slightly with eyes. Not hands.

“Out?”

“Yes.”

I pulled tray halfway. Tangle leaned in.

“Clean.”

“Yes.”

Then latch. Tangle pointed.

“Two.”

“Two steps.”

I showed outer guard, then latch. Tangle nodded.

“Kat.”

I laughed.

“Exactly.”

Katniss sat behind me. She looked insulted. Tangle looked at her.

“Kat smart.”

“Yes.”

Then enclosure.

“Need more smart.”

I stared.

“That’s… exactly right.”

Tangle smiled. Their English was moving quickly. Not smoothly. But quickly. Probably listening more than talking. That made sense. Then Tangle pointed at cabinet. Mercer cabinet. I noticed immediately. Tangle looked at me first. Good.

“Mine?”

They asked. I shook head.

“Mine.”

Tangle nodded. No touch. Good. Then they pointed to table.

“Look?”

I thought. That was different. I opened cabinet. Pulled out one photocopy. Not all. Mercer bridge photo. Set it on table. Tangle approached. Slow. Looked. Very long. Then tilted photo sideways. I nearly corrected them. Did not. Good. Tangle turned it back. Pointed at road. Then river. Then one corner of image.

“Same.”

I looked.

“Same what?”

Tangle pointed through open van door. Toward outside. Then photograph.

“Road.”

I frowned.

“Same road?”

Tangle shook head. Then made walking motion with fingers.

“Go.”

Route. Movement. Maybe. I pulled out alternate company bridge view. Tangle looked at both. One. Then other. Moved them closer. Then farther. Then stacked one partly over another. I felt something tighten. Not fear. Interest. Tangle pointed at bridge. Then hill. Then roofline.

“Same.”

“Yes.”

They had noticed same location quickly. Then they looked at mount edges. Numbers. 17 on one. Another number unclear. Tangle pointed.

“Not same.”

“No.”

Then flipped papers. Back. Front. Then looked at me.

“Who?”

I stopped.

“Photographer?”

Blank. I pointed to camera. Then photo.

“Who made?”

Tangle nodded.

“Who.”

“E. Mercer.”

I wrote E. Mercer on scrap paper. Tangle stared at letters. Then said something in own language. I did not understand.

“Mercer.”

Tangle tried.

“Mer...ser.”

“Close.”

Then I pulled company note. North River Improvement Company. Tangle looked at that too. I pointed to company. Then photos. Then money gesture. Bad.

“Maybe paid Mercer.”

Too many words. Tangle looked blank. I simplified.

"Company." Point. "Mercer." Point. "Money." I rubbed fingers.

Tangle understood money.

"Company give Mercer."

"Maybe."

Tangle nodded. Then pointed at photos.

"Why?"

There it was.

"That's the question."

Blank. I tried simpler.

"Why photo?"

Tangle looked at bridge. Road. River. Then said: "Show." I stopped.

"Show what?"

Tangle pointed at road. Then bridge. Then tapped table.

"Made."

Improvement. Construction. Proof.

"Show what they made."

Tangle nodded. That was already one of my theories. Still. Then Tangle pointed at second image.

"Show... before?"

I stared.

"Before?"

Tangle nodded. Then first photo. Then second.

"Before. After."

I looked at images. No. Maybe. The two bridge views might not be same date. I had been comparing angles. Not state of construction. I looked closer. One approach had raw earth. The other looked more finished. Could be season. Could be later date. Could be angle. But. Interesting. I wrote: Compare Mercer/company photos for progress sequence, not just subject/location.

Tangle watched pencil. Then pointed at note.

"Fix?"

I laughed.

"Maybe."

Tangle nodded.

"Maybe fix."

Good. I put papers away. Not because done. Because enough. Tangle looked disappointed.

"Later."

They understood that one.

"Later."

Then pointed at road.

"Go?"

"Yes."

We drove. Tangle disappeared into brush before I started engine. Then reappeared half mile later on ridge. Fast. I pretended not to notice. An hour passed. Then another. At a small overlook, I stopped for light. No mystery. No Mercer.

A lone tree stood above dry slope. Cloud shadow moved over hills behind it. Camera. First frame. Tree too centered. Moved right. Now trunk held one edge. Valley opened behind. Wait. Cloud moved. One ridge brightened. Click. Keeper. Good. Then I heard: "Bone." I lowered camera. Tangle sat twenty feet away. I had not heard them arrive.

"That's unsettling."

Blank. I pointed at Tangle. Then my ears. Then shook head.

"Quiet."

Tangle nodded.

"Good."

Of course. They looked at camera.

"Photo."

"Yes."

Tangle pointed at tree.

"Why?"

I thought. That was a bigger question than expected.

"Light."

I pointed at bright ridge. Then tree. Then camera.

"Light good."

Tangle considered. Then: "Tree same."

"Yes."

"Light different."

I smiled.

"Exactly."

Tangle looked pleased. Then pointed at camera.

"Wait light."

I stared.

"Yes."

Tangle nodded.

"Bone wait."

"Sometimes a long time."

Too many words. I pantomimed sitting. Waiting. Sun moving. Tangle laughed.

"Bone wait many."

"Unfortunately."

We walked back. Tangle stayed nearby. At van, Blaze greeted. Katniss watched. Echo screamed. Tangle said: "Echo loud."

"Very."

"Very loud."

"Correct."

That word they did not know. I gave thumbs-up. Tangle copied. Good. At camp that evening, Tangle remained. Not inside. Near edge. That was new. I set water out. Food separately. Tangle ate same things we did without complaint. Bread. Fruit. A little cooked vegetables. They rejected pickle immediately. I respected that. Echo out time happened with normal divider.

Tangle watched from outside. Katniss separated. Blaze positioned. Tangle pointed at divider.

"Kat smart."

"Yes."

"Echo small."

"Yes."

"Kat eat?"

"Maybe."

Tangle's eyes widened. I pointed at Katniss. Then Echo. Then shook head.

"Never together."

Tangle nodded.

"Fix."

I smiled.

"Management."

Blank.

"Fix."

"Close enough."

Later, Echo returned secure. Divider down. Katniss immediately walked outside. Tangle stayed still. Katniss approached closer than before. Maybe six feet. Stopped. Tangle looked away. Good. Katniss sat. Tangle sat too. Neither moved. Blaze lay between them. Echo made soft noises inside. For five minutes, nothing happened. It was one of better introductions I had seen. After dark, Tangle stood.

"Go."

"Okay."

They pointed at camp. Then themselves.

"Back."

"Tomorrow?"

Tangle thought.

"Maybe."

Of course.

"Maybe."

They disappeared. I opened notebook. First: Tangle continues to respect stated boundaries. Asked before looking at Mercer material. Then: Noticed alternate bridge views may represent a before/after or progress sequence rather than only different angles. Worth checking. Then: Tangle learns quickly through context. Asked "why photo?" Answered "show" and "made." Then: Photography observation: "Tree same. Light different." Accurate.

I smiled. Then: Katniss approached within ~6 feet voluntarily. No contact. Good. Then today's photograph: Lone tree / bright ridge / moving cloud shadow. Keeper. Good. I almost closed notebook. Then added: Tangle said "back." That mattered more than expected. I closed notebook. Outside, dark. No call. No bottle caps. No pine cones. Nothing left behind. For once, Tangle had simply said they were coming back.

That was enough.

CHAPTER 59

The Things Tangle Carried

Tangle came back before breakfast. Not to camp. Near camp. Difference mattered. I saw movement beyond the trees while coffee was still deciding whether to become drinkable. Dark fur. Staff. Pouch. Then gone.

"Morning."

Nothing. Echo answered instead. Two notes. From trees: two back. Good enough. Blaze noticed. Katniss noticed. Neither cared enough to get up. Progress. Ten minutes later Tangle appeared at edge of clearing.

"Morning."

"Morning."

Better. They looked at coffee.

"Bone drink."

"Yes."

Tangle sniffed air. Made face.

"Bad."

I looked at cup.

"Correct."

Tangle smiled. Good. Breakfast became lesson. Not intentionally. Bread. Fruit. Eggs. Nectar. Dog food. Cat food. Tangle pointed.

"Bone food."

"Yes."

Then Blaze bowl.

"Blaze food."

"Yes."

Katniss.

"Kat-niss food."

"Yes."

Echo nectar.

"Echo food."

"Yes."

Then pointed at coffee.

"Bad."

I looked at them.

"You learn fast."

Blank. I pointed at head. Then Tangle.

"Smart."

Tangle pointed back at me.

"Bone smart."

"Sometimes."

They didn't know sometimes. Probably safer. Tangle ate with us. Not at table exactly. Near it. Still keeping own distance. They had dried berries in pouch. Nuts. Something that looked like root. I watched without meaning to. Tangle noticed.

"Food."

"Yes."

Then they opened pouch more. Not invitation. Explanation. Inside: food. Cord. Small folded cloth. Two pieces of bark. A smooth stone. Three metal washers. A bent spoon handle. I stared. Tangle saw that.

"Useful."

I laughed.

"Maybe."

Tangle pulled out spoon handle. Bent twice. Flattened at one end. Then pointed at staff. A small leather wrap near lower grip had a loose edge. Tangle slid spoon handle beneath wrap. Pressed it flat. Tucked cord. Fixed.

"Useful."

"All right."

They put spoon handle back. Then washers. Tangle stacked them. One larger. Two smaller.

"Useful?"

Tangle nodded. Very serious.

"For what?"

Too much. I pointed at washers. "Why?" Tangle thought. Then shrugged.

"Later."

I laughed harder than necessary.

"Fair."

They knew later now. Good. The blue bottle caps suddenly made more sense. Not messages. Not exactly. Materials. Possibilities. Things that might become useful if kept long enough. That explained some of it. Not all. I pointed toward pouch.

"You make?"

Tangle looked down.

"Pouch?"

They touched it. I nodded. Tangle paused. Then: "Made."

"You?"

Tangle pointed at self.

"Some."

Interesting.

"Some?"

They touched one patch. Then another.

"Fix."

Ah. Maybe original pouch came from somewhere else. Maybe Tangle had rebuilt half of it. I did not ask. Not yet. They seemed comfortable talking about objects. Origins felt different. Good. I respected difference. After breakfast, Tangle inspected van. From outside. Again. Not inside. They walked around rear. Looked underneath. Touched nothing. Then pointed.

"Old."

"Very."

Tangle nodded.

"Good."

I stared.

"You're going to get along with Ray."

Nothing. Too many words. Tangle crouched beside one tire. Looked at tread. Sidewall. Then at me.

"New."

"Yes."

Then van body.

"Old."

"Yes."

Then tire again.

"New."

"Exactly."

Tangle looked pleased. They understood repairs. Not restoration. Useful versus original. That felt familiar. Blaze wandered over. Tangle pointed.

“Blaze old?”

I laughed.

“No.”

Blaze looked offended anyway.

“Blaze strong.”

Tangle nodded.

“Very.”

That repaired relationship. Katniss appeared on roof. Tangle looked up.

“Kat high.”

“Usually.”

No understanding.

“Kat likes high.”

Tangle nodded.

“See.”

That was right. High places let her see. Echo yelled from enclosure. Tangle looked toward him.

“Echo loud.”

“Always.”

“Always.”

New word. Unfortunately useful. We drove after breakfast. Tangle did not enter van. I didn’t ask. I pointed down road.

“Go.”

Tangle nodded.

“Follow.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

Then disappeared. I drove. For fifteen minutes I saw nothing. Then a glimpse on ridge. Upright. Staff. Then gone. Twenty minutes later: same shape near creek. Fast. Very fast. I stopped comparing speed to van. That felt unfair. Late morning, we reached an old roadside rest area. Nothing special. Tables. Trees. A stone retaining wall. I stopped because Blaze needed walk.

Tangle arrived five minutes later. Not winded. Rude. They crouched beside wall. One stone had shifted outward. Tangle touched it.

“Bad.”

“Don’t.”

They froze. Good. I walked over. Stone was part of retaining wall. Not ours. Not safe to move casually. I pointed.

“Not ours.”

Tangle looked at stone. Then wall. Then me.

“Bad.”

“Yes.”

I pointed at wall. Then shook head.

“Not ours.”

Tangle thought. Then: “Leave bad?” Good question. I looked at wall.

“Tell.”

Blank. I pointed toward maintenance sign near restroom. Then wall. Then phone.

“Tell people.”

Tangle looked doubtful. Fair. I took photo with phone. Reference. Then found posted number and reported loose stone. Tangle watched entire process. After call: “Fix?”

“Maybe.”

Tangle nodded.

“Other fix.”

I stopped.

“Yes.”

Exactly. Not every fix meant touching thing yourself. That mattered. Tangle sat on wall. Staff across knees. Then looked at me.

“Bone fix many.”

I laughed.

“No.”

They pointed at van.

“Fix.”

“Mostly other people.”

Blank. I pointed at self. Shook head. Then imaginary mechanic. Wrench. Tangle watched.

“Other fix.”

“Yes.”

Then camera.

“Bone fix photo?”

I stared.

"No."

Tangle tilted head. I thought.

"Bone waits."

They smiled.

"Bone wait many."

"Unfortunately."

Good. We walked. Tangle followed beside Blaze more naturally now. Not close enough to touch. Katniss stayed behind us. At one point Tangle stopped. Picked up a feather. Turned it. Looked at Echo through trees. Then put feather down. Not useful apparently. Standards existed. At trail edge, Tangle found broken plastic buckle. Picked it up. Pouch.

"Useful?"

"Later."

They nodded. Of course. At noon, we ate near creek. Tangle pointed at my camera.

"Photo?"

"Maybe."

They looked around. Creek. Trees. Rocks. Then pointed at one fallen branch.

"Photo."

I followed line. Nothing.

"It's a branch."

Blank. I pointed. "Why?" Tangle moved three steps. Pointed again. From there, branch framed reflection of sky in creek. Ah. I raised camera. Too busy. Moved slightly. Better. Waited. Cloud opened. Reflection brightened. Click. Keeper. I lowered camera. Tangle looked pleased.

"Tree same. Light different."

"You're stealing my job."

Blank. Good. We ate. Tangle watched camera after that. Not obsessively. Curiously. I showed back screen. Their own suggestion. Tangle stared. Then looked at actual creek. Then screen. Then creek.

"Small."

"The picture?"

They pointed at screen. "Small creek."

"Yes."

Then actual creek. "Big creek."

"Also yes."

Tangle thought. Then: “Same. Not same.” I smiled.

“That’s photography.”

No understanding. Still true. After lunch, Tangle brought out small folded cloth. Opened it. Inside: tiny pieces. Metal spring. Two screws. A red bead. A bit of wire. A smooth glass shard with rounded edges. I stared.

“Treasure?”

Tangle didn’t know word. I pointed at objects. “Important?” Tangle thought. Then: “Could.”

“Could be important.”

“Could.”

That might have been most Tangle word yet. Not what something was. What it could become. Interesting. Then Tangle pointed at my Mercer cabinet through open van door.

“Could.”

I laughed once.

“Definitely.”

They looked at me. I hesitated. Then opened cabinet. Not invitation to everything. I pulled out three copies. Bridge. Road. Company inventory note. Tangle came closer. I set them on table. No touching at first. Good.

“Look.”

Tangle pointed at self. “Look?”

“Yes.”

They began. Slow. Not like me. I read words first. Dates. Names. Labels. Tangle looked at shapes. Edges. Repeated marks. Then turned one sheet around. I let them. They put bridge photo sideways next to road image. Wrong orientation. Probably. Then moved inventory note below both. I watched. Tangle pointed at little numbers.

“Same… thing?”

“Maybe same series.”

Too many words. I pointed at numbers. Then photos. “Maybe together.” Tangle nodded. Then separated them.

“No.”

I frowned.

“No?”

Tangle pointed at number. Then subject. Then number again.

“Number… not road.”

I stared.

“Number doesn’t describe road?”

Blank. I tried simpler.

“Number for paper?”

Tangle nodded. Maybe. Then pointed at company note.

“House.”

“Company?”

“House.”

They used wrong word. I thought. Organization. Place where things belong.

“Company keeps them?”

Tangle nodded.

“Keep.”

Then photos. “Keep number.” That matched what I already suspected. Company-side cataloging. Good. Tangle had reached it faster. Still not magic. Just pattern. I wrote: Tangle independently treats mount numbers as collection labels, not subject labels. Tangle watched me write.

“Paper many.”

“Very.”

They touched nothing else. Good. Then pointed at one corner of bridge photo. Tiny building.

“Here.”

Then road photo. No building.

“Not here.”

Different locations maybe. Different direction. Different date. I leaned closer.

“Good catch.”

Tangle didn’t understand. Thumbs-up. They copied. That worked. I pulled another Mercer print. Tangle’s eyes sharpened. Interesting. Then I stopped myself. Enough. This was exactly how obsession expanded.

“Later.”

Tangle looked disappointed.

“Later.”

“Yes.”

They accepted. Good. We drove farther. Tangle followed outside. That still felt strange. Afternoon became windy. At one stop, Tangle arrived with new leaves worked into fur. Different environment. Different camouflage. They had replaced dry brown pieces with greener ones. I pointed.

"New."

Tangle nodded.

"Here."

Then old brown leaf from pouch.

"Not here."

Practical. Camouflage updated by environment. Good. I wrote mental note. Then actual note. Mental notes disappeared. Camouflage refreshed to match surroundings. Deliberate and practical. Good. We camped near low trees. Tangle stayed. Closer than before. Still outside. Dinner. They ate same food. No pickle. Consistent. Echo out time. Divider. Katniss separated. Blaze positioned. Tangle watched. Then pointed at Echo.

"Out."

"Yes."

Katniss.

"Not out."

"Correct."

Tangle considered. Then: "Both good." I smiled.

"Yes."

"Together bad."

"Potentially."

Blank.

"Maybe bad."

"Maybe bad."

Good. After Echo secure, divider down. Katniss came out. Tangle sat. Katniss approached. Five feet. Then four. Tangle did nothing. Katniss sniffed staff. Tangle looked at me. I stayed still. Katniss sniffed pouch. Then stepped away. That was it. Good. Blaze came over after. Tangle touched his shoulder once. First touch. Blaze accepted. Then leaned. Tangle nearly fell over.

I laughed.

"Big."

Tangle braced with staff.

"Very."

Blaze leaned more.

"Blaze."

Dog looked at me.

"You're going to crush our guest."

No one understood guest. Tangle did understand crush. Apparently.

“Blaze crush.”

“No.”

Tangle laughed. Good. After dark, we sat. No fire. Dry conditions. Just lantern. Tangle watched flame inside glass. Not fascinated. Familiar. Then they pointed at Ellen’s compass when I pulled notebook from pack. I had forgotten it was partly visible. Tangle leaned closer.

“Mine.”

I said it before they asked. Tangle stopped. Then nodded.

“Bone mine.”

“Yes.”

They did not touch. Then: “Why?” I looked at compass. That question was harder.

“Friend.”

Tangle understood friend? Maybe. I pointed down road behind us. Then compass. Then myself.

“Friend gave.”

Tangle thought.

“Friend gone?”

I froze.

“Not gone.”

Ray alive. I shook head.

“Friend there.” I pointed vaguely backward.

Tangle nodded. Then touched pouch. Something inside.

“Friend.”

I looked. Did not ask to see. Good. Tangle noticed that too. Maybe. They let pouch fall closed. We sat. Quiet. Then Tangle asked: “Bone from?” I looked over.

“Where am I from?”

Blank. I pointed at self. Then behind. “Bone from?” Tangle nodded. Interesting. I told them simply.

“Far away.”

Then pointed generally west.

“Many places.”

Tangle thought.

“Bone no home?”

That one landed. I looked at van.

"Home."

Tangle followed gaze.

"Van home."

"Yes."

They nodded. Then: "Road home?" I smiled.

"Sometimes."

Too much. I pointed at van. Then road. Then myself.

"Both."

Tangle thought.

"Both."

Good. I wanted to ask them. Where are you from? The question reached mouth. Stopped. Not yet. They had offered nickname. A little language. A little trust. Enough. I didn't need everything because I had a question. So instead I pointed at pouch.

"Useful."

Tangle smiled.

"Very."

Good. Before leaving, Tangle stood.

"Back."

"Tomorrow?"

"Maybe."

Of course. Then paused.

"Bone."

"Yeah?"

They pointed at camera. Then creek direction.

"Good photo."

I stared.

"You liked it?"

Blank. Thumbs-up. Tangle copied.

"Good."

Then they disappeared into trees. I opened notebook. Today's photograph: Creek reflection framed by fallen branch / brief light. Keeper. Tangle spotted composition first. That felt strange to write. Then: Tangle collects objects for possible future use. "Could" may be central to how they evaluate things.

Then: Understands that some problems should be reported rather than physically repaired. “Other fix.” Then: Katniss voluntarily approached Tangle and investigated staff/pouch. No contact beyond sniffing. Blaze accepted first touch and immediately abused privilege by leaning. Accurate.

Then: Tangle appears to understand Mercer collection numbering as an organizational system belonging to whoever kept the photographs, not necessarily the photographer. Consistent with existing evidence. Good. Then I stopped. One more thing. Tangle asked where I am from. I did not ask in return. I stared at that. Then added: Not yet. Closed notebook. Echo settled. Katniss curled on bench. Blaze slept near door.

Three companions inside. One somewhere outside. Not part of group. Not exactly. Not yet. That was fine. Some things became useful later. Apparently.

CHAPTER 60

The Time She Needed

Tangle came back with a spoon. Not a whole spoon. That would have been too simple. Just the bowl. Flattened slightly. No handle. They held it up before saying good morning. I looked at spoon. Then Tangle.

“Useful?”

Tangle nodded.

“Very.”

Of course.

“Morning.”

“Morning.”

Blaze came over. Tangle scratched his shoulder once. That was becoming normal. Katniss watched from step. Closer than before. Echo yelled. Tangle looked toward van.

“Echo loud.”

“Always.”

“Always.”

Good. I poured coffee. Tangle looked at it.

“Bad.”

“Also always.”

They did not know also. Probably unnecessary. Tangle sat near picnic table. Not at it. Near. I handed over fruit. They opened pouch. Added spoon bowl. I pointed.

“Why?”

Tangle turned it over. Pressed thumb against curve. Then pointed toward staff.

“Could.”

There it was again.

“Could what?”

Blank. I gestured. “Use how?” Tangle thought. Then wedged flattened spoon bowl against end of staff. Made scooping motion.

“Dig.”

“Ah.”

Then turned it sideways.

“Cut.”

Not sharply. Scrape maybe. Then held it under imaginary drip.

“Water.”

I smiled.

“Three jobs.”

Tangle held up three fingers. Good. Then they put it away. I looked at my camera bag. My notebook. The van. The collection of repairs accumulated over road. Tangle saw objects as possibilities. I tended to see them as what they had already been. Interesting. Breakfast ended. No research yet. That was deliberate. We walked first. Blaze ahead. Katniss behind. Tangle beside trail.

Not much talking. Good. At one point Tangle stopped beside fallen branch. Not to fix it. Just climbed over. Also good. I had started worrying every broken thing in world was going to become a project. Apparently Tangle had standards. We reached creek. Yesterday’s bark step still there. Tangle tested it. Stable.

“Good.”

“Still less bad?”

Tangle smiled.

“Good now.”

That felt like promotion. On way back, my phone rang. Margaret. I answered.

“Morning.”

“Morning. Is this a bad time?”

I looked at Tangle. Blaze. Katniss. Creek.

“No.”

There was pause. Then: “How’s he doing?” Echo.

“Currently yelling at nothing.”

Margaret laughed.

“Good.”

“Very healthy yelling.”

“Perfect.”

We walked slowly back toward van. Margaret asked about enclosure.

“Fine.”

“Still no rattling?”

“No.”

“Still eating?”

“Yes.”

“Still trying to dismantle civilization?”

“Actively.”

Another laugh. Then quieter: “Good.” I heard something change. I waited.

“Bone?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve been meaning to tell you something.”

Dangerous.

“I owe you an apology.”

“More dangerous.”

She laughed once. Not much.

“All those extra checks.”

I knew immediately.

“The drives?”

“The drives. The overnight. Asking Priya to look at things again. Asking about the enclosure twice after she’d already said it was fine.”

I kept walking. Tangle glanced at me. Then away. Margaret continued.

“Some of it was Echo.”

“Some?”

Silence.

“Some of it was me.”

There it was. I said nothing.

“I knew before I was ready to say it.”

We reached van. Echo saw me through window. Yelled. Margaret heard.

“Still him.”

“Definitely.”

She breathed out.

“I think I knew you were probably right for him after that first real road trial.”

I leaned against van.

“But every extra thing gave me another day.”

I looked at Echo. He was upside down. Naturally.

"Another day where he was still technically mine?"

"Yeah."

Her voice got smaller.

"And another day where I didn't have to admit that Diane's bird was leaving."

I looked away. Tangle sat twenty feet off. Blaze lay near them. Katniss climbed onto step. Margaret said: "I wasn't trying to make it difficult."

"I know."

"I just needed to be sure."

Pause.

"And maybe I needed time to say goodbye."

That made sense. More than sense.

"You could've told me."

She laughed softly.

"Would you have let me drag it out?"

I thought.

"Probably."

"Exactly."

Fair. Then: "I'm sorry."

"You don't need to be."

"I do a little."

"Fine. A little."

She laughed. Good. Then I said: "For what it's worth, I think all the extra checking did one useful thing."

"What?"

"It made me build better."

I looked at enclosure.

"It made me think through things I would've otherwise solved later."

Margaret went quiet again.

"That helps."

"Good."

Then I added: "But we're not doing another seven-stage approval process if he decides he doesn't like breakfast." She laughed properly this time.

"Deal."

Echo screamed.

“He’s objecting.”

“Tell him I said no.”

“I don’t think that’s how this works.”

“It never was.”

We talked a few more minutes. Nothing important. Which was important. Weather. Road. Echo’s whistle. Then Margaret said: “I miss him.” Simple.

“I know.”

“And I’m still glad he’s with you.”

“Both can be true.”

“Yeah.”

That was enough. We hung up. I stood there a while. Tangle watched. Not intrusively. Then: “Sad?” I looked over.

“Some.”

Tangle nodded.

“Friend?”

“Yes.”

I pointed to phone.

“Margaret.”

Tangle tried.

“Mar...gret.”

“Close.”

Then pointed to Echo.

“Friend Echo?”

“Family.”

Tangle tilted head. I pointed at Echo. Then phone. Then myself.

“Family.”

Tangle looked at all three points. Then Blaze. Katniss. Then me.

“Family.”

I stopped.

“Yes.”

Tangle looked at them again. Then at self. Not asking. Just looking. I did not fill silence. Good. They looked away. Road. We drove for a while. Tangle followed somewhere outside. No need to check constantly. I saw them once on ridge. Once near drainage. Then not for an hour. That was fine. Midday brought small town. Lunch. Fuel. Nothing historic.

Excellent. Then I saw historical marker. Ignored it. Strength. Ten minutes later: used bookstore. Less strength. I stopped. Tangle appeared before I finished parking.

“Books.”

“You know books?”

They looked through window.

“Marks.”

“Writing.”

“Writing.”

Good. Inside, Tangle did not come. Not surprising. I browsed. Photography. Regional history. Old business directories. Mercer tried to drag me sideways. I resisted. Mostly. Then found a thin reprint: Commercial Photography and Western Development, 1880–1900 Of course. I bought it. Outside, Tangle sat near tree. I held book up.

“Bad.”

Tangle grinned. Apparently coffee was not only bad thing.

“Research.”

“Bad.”

“Correct.”

We ate lunch nearby. I opened book. Tangle leaned in. Photographs of roads. Hotels. Mills. Residences. Rail lines. Construction. Nothing surprising anymore. One caption discussed photographers producing numbered view sets for companies, land agents, railroads, and tourists. I stopped. There. Again. Numbered views could belong to client catalog. Or photographer catalog. Or reseller. Not one answer. Multiple systems.

Good. I wrote: Numbering alone cannot identify creator or owner. Need contextual match. Tangle looked at note.

“Paper many.”

“Always.”

They repeated: “Always.” Bad word to teach. Then I showed one illustration. A photographer with equipment. Tripod. Cases. Boxes. Tangle stared.

“Heavy.”

“Yes.”

They pointed at pack. Then photograph.

“Many carry.”

I looked at them.

“Exactly.”

That question again. Who carried Mercer equipment? Maybe assistant. Driver. Teamster. Hotel porter. Customer. Mercer themself in repeated trips. Tangle had independently landed on logistics. I wrote: Look for assistant / driver / teamster / porter references connected to Mercer stops. Tangle saw me write.

"Fix?"

"Maybe."

They nodded.

"Maybe fix."

That was becoming dangerous. Afternoon road climbed. Clouds low. One abandoned orchard. Bare rows. A single old ladder leaning against tree. Camera. I stopped. First frame had too much ladder. Moved farther back. Rows pulled toward hill. Ladder became small. Waited. Light crossed only one line of trees. Click. Keeper. Tangle had arrived behind me. Quiet again.

"Bone wait many."

"Not that long."

They pointed at light.

"Good now."

"Yes."

Then pointed at ladder.

"Why?"

"Because it belongs there."

Blank. I tried.

"Ladder small."

Tangle nodded.

"Tree many."

"Yes."

Then: "Road for eyes." I stared. They pointed along orchard rows. Leading lines.

"Road for eyes."

I smiled.

"That's actually very good."

No understanding. Thumbs-up. They copied. Good. At camp, Tangle stayed closer. Not just edge. Near table. Still no van. Fine. Dinner. Blaze leaned on Tangle again. Tangle braced earlier this time.

"Very."

"Yes."

Katniss came within three feet. Sat. Tangle did not move. Good. Echo watched from enclosure. Then called: “Tan...gle.” Tangle’s ears moved.

“Echo.”

Echo whistled. Tangle copied. I regretted all decisions. After food, I opened Mercer envelope. Not all of it. Three pages. Tangle watched. I pointed.

“Look?”

Tangle nodded. This time they waited until I pushed papers toward them. Good. They arranged them. Not much. Company notice. Voucher transcription. Mercer ad. Then tapped: E.M. Then: E. Mercer Then money line. I nodded.

“Maybe same.”

Tangle nodded.

“Maybe.”

Then they pointed at date. Voucher date. Advertisement date. Close. Tangle moved them side by side. Then frowned.

“Not enough.”

I stared.

“Exactly.”

They had learned maybe too well. I added company notice. Tangle pointed.

“More.”

“Yes.”

“Still not enough.”

I smiled.

“You’re learning research.”

Blank.

“Bad.”

They grinned. Then Tangle did something unexpected. They pushed all three pages apart. Pointed at each separately.

“Mercer.” “Company.” “Money.”

Then put finger in center.

“Need... bridge.”

I looked.

“Bridge?”

Tangle shook head. They searched. Hands moved as if connecting.

“Between.”

Ah.

“Connection.”

Tangle repeated badly.

“Con...nect.”

“Yes.”

They pointed at three piles again.

“Need connect.”

That was exactly it. Not more paper. Connection. I wrote: Need document that directly connects Mercer to company payment/work. Not more circumstantial parallel evidence. Tangle watched. Then tapped notebook.

“Good.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you.”

Nice. I put papers away. No obsession tonight. Progress. Later, quiet. Tangle sat by table. Blaze sleeping against one boot. Katniss on bench. Echo settled. I thought about Margaret. All those tests. All those extra days. At time, they had felt like delay. Maybe they were. But delay wasn’t always waste. Sometimes people needed time to reach decision they’d already made.

I looked at Tangle. No rush. Good lesson. I opened notebook one more time. Margaret admitted extra Echo checks were partly for her. She needed time to let go. Then: Do not confuse patience with indecision. I stared. That one applied broadly.

Then today’s photograph: Abandoned orchard / rows leading toward hill / old ladder small in frame / brief light. Keeper. And beneath it: Tangle: “Road for eyes.” I liked that. Tangle stood.

“Back.”

“Tomorrow?”

They thought.

“Maybe.”

Of course. Then they looked at Blaze. Katniss. Echo. Me.

“Family.”

I stopped. Tangle touched own chest. Then paused. No word. Not yet. I did not supply one. Good. They picked up staff.

“Night.”

“Good night, Tangle.”

They disappeared into dark. Blaze watched. Katniss watched. Echo gave two notes. From farther away: two notes back. Then quiet.

CHAPTER 61

A Seat That Wasn’t Offered

Rain started before coffee finished. Not dramatic rain. No thunder. No wind. Just steady. Persistent. The kind that had apparently made a commitment. Blaze stood beneath awning and considered weather. Then came back inside. Katniss had already made that decision. Echo watched drops run down window. Tangle was nowhere. That bothered me more than it should have. Yesterday they had said maybe.

Maybe meant maybe. I knew this. Still. I poured coffee. Bad whistle.

“Correct.”

Rain thickened. The road could wait. So could Mercer. That one surprised me. I sat with book instead. Not research. Novel. Three pages. Then something tapped side of van. Once. I looked up. Another tap. Not mysterious anymore. I opened door. Tangle stood outside. Soaked. Leaves flattened against fur. Pouch dark with water. Staff dripping. They looked miserable.

I tried not to laugh. Failed slightly. Tangle stared at me.

“Rain.”

“Yes.”

“Bad.”

“Very.”

Tangle looked into van. Then at me. Did not move. That mattered. I stepped aside.

“Come in.”

Blank. I pointed inside.

“In.”

Tangle looked at floor. At Blaze. Katniss. Echo. Then me.

“In?”

“Yes.”

One step. Then stopped. Staff first. They leaned it carefully beside door. Then Tangle climbed inside. No ceremony. No test. No committee.

Just wet Tangle on floor. Good. Blaze sniffed. Tangle held out hand. Blaze approved. Katniss watched from bench. Echo yelled. Tangle looked up.

"Echo loud."

"Rain didn't fix that."

No understanding. Tangle shook water from one arm. Katniss jumped backward. I laughed.

"Maybe don't."

Tangle looked at cat.

"Kat no rain."

"Kat strongly agrees."

I found towel. Held it out. Tangle looked.

"Towel."

They knew that one. Good. Tangle dried face. Then ears. Then hands. The rest apparently qualified as weather. They sat on floor between front seats and table. Not cramped. Just unfamiliar. Eyes everywhere. Cabinets. Windows. Enclosure. Ceiling. Curtains. Then: "Home." I looked at them.

"Yes."

Tangle touched floor.

"Bone home."

"Yes."

Then pointed at Blaze. Katniss. Echo.

"Family home."

That landed.

"Yes."

Tangle nodded. No question. No self-pointing. Not today. Good. Rain continued. Tangle pulled pouch into lap. Everything inside came out. Apparently wet gear meant inventory. Food. Cord. Washers. Spoon pieces. Cloth. Wire. Buckle. Smooth stone. Glass. And three bottle caps. I stared. Tangle noticed.

"Useful."

"Naturally."

One cap was blue. Of course. I opened towel on table.

"Dry."

Tangle understood. They spread things across it. Not randomly. Metal together. Food separate. Cord coiled. Cloth folded. Bottle caps nested by size. I watched. Interesting. Tangle caught me watching.

"Wrong?"

"No."

I pointed at arrangement.

"Order."

Tangle frowned.

"Order?"

I moved two washers beside one another. Then cap beside caps.

"Order."

Tangle looked at layout. Then shook head.

"No."

I stopped.

"No?"

Tangle moved large washer away from small washers. Placed it beside bent spoon bowl. Then put one bottle cap with cord. From my perspective: worse. Tangle tapped each group.

"Together."

I looked.

"Why?"

Tangle picked up washer and spoon bowl. Put them against staff. Potential brace. Then cord and bottle cap. Made tiny loop. Potential fastener. Ah. Not grouped by what things were. Grouped by what they might do together.

"Useful together."

Tangle nodded.

"Together."

That was different. I wrote nothing. Important. Some observations did not need immediate notebook. Rain eased around eleven. We drove. Tangle stayed inside. That happened with less discussion than expected. They sat near side window. Staff secured beside pack because it fit there. I did not write a procedure. Good. First ten miles, Tangle stared outside. Not nervous. Not excited.

Calculating. Road. Trees. Turns. Distances. Then: "Fast."

"Yes."

Tangle pointed through rear window.

"Walk slow."

"Compared to this."

Blank. I pointed at van. "Fast." Then legs. "Slow." Tangle nodded.

"Van very."

"Very fast."

Tangle considered.

“Not very.”

I laughed. Fair. On highway, absolutely not. Echo gave bad whistle. Tangle copied. I regretted introducing acoustics to enclosed space. Blaze sighed. Katniss relocated farther back. Good judgment. After twenty minutes, Tangle stopped watching road and started watching me drive. Hands. Mirrors. Pedals. Gearshift. No questions. Then: “Bone fix?”

“Drive.”

“Drive.”

They watched.

“Bone drive.”

“Yes.”

Tangle pointed to self.

“Drive?”

I looked at them.

“No.”

Immediate. Tangle grinned. Good. We stopped around noon. Rain gone. Road wet. Air clean. Tangle got out before Blaze. Then waited. Blaze joined. Katniss eventually. No one made a big deal of it. That felt important. Tangle had ridden in van. Now Tangle was outside. Life continued. We walked short path through wet cottonwoods. Everything smelled stronger after rain.

Tangle refreshed camouflage. Wet bark. Green leaves. A few darker stems. They discarded old dry pieces. Not littered. Pouch. Of course. Blaze found mud. Naturally. Katniss avoided mud. Naturally. Tangle stepped directly through it. Then looked at muddy foot.

“Bad.”

I laughed.

“Fix?”

Tangle looked at creek. Washed foot.

“Fix.”

Good. Phone rang. Lena. Museum director. I answered.

“Bone?”

“Yeah.”

“I found something you might want.”

Of course she had. Tangle looked over. I mouthed: “Paper.” Tangle made face. Apparently research had become category. Lena continued.

“You remember voucher 1847?”

"I've developed an unhealthy relationship with it."

"Well, I found a county microfilm reference to the original register."

I stopped walking. Tangle stopped too.

"Reference or image?"

"Image."

There.

"Readable?"

"Mostly."

Mostly. The natural enemy of certainty.

"And?"

"I think you should see it yourself."

"That's cruel."

"I know."

She laughed.

"I can email scan."

"Please."

A few seconds later phone chimed. File. I opened. Bad scan. Tilted. Faded. But readable. Voucher 1847. Date. Amount. Description. E. Mercer — photographic views & mounts — $15.00 I stared. There it was. Not initials. Not transcription. Name. E. Mercer. Payment. North River Improvement Company. Direct. Tangle stepped closer.

"Mercer?"

"Yes."

I showed screen. They recognized name now.

"Money."

"Yes."

"Company give Mercer."

"Yes."

Tangle nodded. Like this had been obvious all along. For me, it had taken several libraries, two archives, one museum basement, a historical society binder, and an unreasonable amount of coffee. Good. I told Lena: "That's the connection."

"Looks like it."

"Still doesn't tell me who Mercer was."

"No."

"Or where they were based."

"No."

“Or whether the company commissioned all the Mercer photographs.”

“No.”

“Excellent.”

“You sound disappointed.”

“I’m thrilled.”

“That’s worse.”

Probably. I thanked her. Before hanging up, Lena said: “There’s another note beside it.” I zoomed. Tiny. A separate hand. Two words. Maybe three. First looked like: per Talbot I stared.

“Is that ’per Talbot’?”

“That’s what I read.”

J. W. Talbot. Riverside House. Interesting. Not necessarily client. Could be referral. Could be authorization. Could be payment instruction. Could be nothing more than where Mercer was reached. But direct connection now touched Talbot too. I wrote on phone: Voucher 1847: E. Mercer — photographic views & mounts — $15.00. Marginal notation possibly “per Talbot.” Good. Lena said she’d keep looking.

I almost told her not to. Didn’t. Weak. We hung up. Tangle watched.

“Fix?”

I shook head.

“One thing fixed.”

Tangle nodded.

“More wrong?”

I laughed.

“Yes.”

Tangle seemed pleased. Of course. We walked. For first time, Mercer felt smaller. Not solved. But contained. E. Mercer had definitely been paid by company. That piece was no longer mystery. Good. Road after lunch turned toward low hills. Tangle rode again. No hesitation this time. They chose same place near side window. Katniss chose bench. Blaze floor. Echo enclosure.

Nobody negotiated. Excellent. Tangle watched wet road unwind. Then pointed ahead.

“Photo.”

I looked.

“Where?”

Tangle pointed. A broken line of clouds had opened above low ridge. Wet asphalt reflected pale sky. A single tree stood near bend. Good. I found turnout. Camera. Tangle came. We walked fifty yards back safely

along shoulder. First frame: too much road. Tangle pointed lower. I crouched. Reflection got stronger. Interesting. Then Tangle pointed at tree.

“Wait.”

I looked at them.

“You’re telling me to wait now?”

Blank. Tangle pointed at cloud.

“Light go.”

They were right. Light moved. Road brightened. Tree stayed dark. Click. Keeper. I lowered camera. Tangle nodded.

“Good now.”

“Yes.”

This was getting annoying. We returned to van. Later, camp. Tangle stayed. Not edge. Not quite table. Closer. Dinner. Same food. No pickle. Consistency mattered. After dinner, I printed nothing. Sorted nothing. Mercer envelope remained closed. That was deliberate. We already had one answer today. Enough. Tangle sat by door. Blaze leaned against them. Prepared this time, Tangle braced.

Katniss sat nearby. Echo made quiet sounds. Then Tangle pointed at van floor.

“Sleep?”

I looked at them.

“You?”

Tangle pointed to self. Then floor.

“Sleep here?”

There it was. Not joining. Not declaration. Just weather had changed. Road had continued. Distance had shortened.

“Yes.”

Tangle looked toward open door. Then outside.

“Inside?”

“Yes.”

No speech. No ceremony. I found spare blanket. Set it down. Tangle touched it.

“Mine?”

“For tonight.”

Too many words. I pointed at Tangle. Then blanket.

“Tangle.”

They nodded.

“Tangle.”

Good enough. They put pack beneath head. Of course. Staff beside them. Blaze settled nearby. Katniss stayed on bench. Echo covered. I wrote one line before sleep. Tangle slept inside van tonight. Asked first. Then today’s photograph: Wet road / low ridge / single tree / moving light reflected in asphalt. Keeper. Tangle told me to wait.

And Mercer: Confirmed: North River Improvement Company paid E. Mercer $15 for photographic views and mounts. Voucher 1847. Possible marginal note: “per Talbot.” I looked at that. Months of maybe. Now one thing wasn’t maybe. Good. I closed notebook. Tangle shifted under blanket.

“Bone.”

“Yeah?”

“Home.”

I looked around van.

“Yeah.”

Tangle touched blanket. Then floor.

“Tonight home.”

I smiled.

“Tonight.”

That was enough.

CHAPTER 62

The Name Behind the Note

Tangle woke before me. I knew because one eye opened to find them sitting cross-legged on the floor with a washer in one hand and a bottle cap in the other. Not doing anything. Just considering.

“Morning.”

Tangle looked over.

“Morning.”

Blaze was still asleep. Katniss was not. She sat three feet away from Tangle. Watching. Tangle looked at her. Katniss looked at Tangle. Neither moved. Good. Echo made one soft sound beneath cover. Then another. Tangle whispered: “Echo sleep.”

“Somebody should.”

Blank. Fine. I sat up. Tangle held out washer. Then bottle cap.

“Together.”

“Maybe.”

Tangle smiled. Apparently that word had become permission to think. Coffee. Breakfast. Nectar. Routine. No ceremony about Tangle having slept inside. That was deliberate. If we made every ordinary thing important, eventually nothing would be. Tangle ate. Blaze leaned. Katniss stole my seat. Echo yelled. Normal. Mostly. After breakfast, Tangle stepped outside. Looked at sky. Then road. Then van.

“Go?”

“Eventually.”

Too much. I pointed at coffee. Then road.

“After.”

Tangle nodded.

“Coffee bad. Road after.”

I looked at cup.

“That’s disturbingly accurate.”

We left half an hour later. Tangle rode inside again. No discussion. They took the same place near side window. Not assigned. Just chosen. Good. The road ran through low hills. Dry grass. Rock. Sparse trees. Tangle watched everything. Not like tourist. Like map. At one point they pointed left.

“Water.”

I looked. Nothing visible. Five minutes later, road crossed creek. I glanced at Tangle. They were looking outside.

“How did you know?”

Blank. I pointed behind. Then ahead. Then mimed water. Tangle thought.

“Trees.”

Ah. Cottonwoods. Greener line in distance. Simple. Good. We stopped near creek. Not because mystery. Because Blaze wanted water. Tangle came out. Katniss eventually. Echo stayed where he was. The creek was shallow. Clear. Nothing dramatic. Tangle crouched beside bank. Picked up flat stone. Turned it. Put it back. Progress. Not everything needed pouch. Then they pointed upstream.

“Bird.”

I looked. Heron. Far. Camera. I almost reached for it. Then didn’t. Too far. Bad light. Tangle watched.

“No photo?”

“No.”

They frowned. I pointed at light. Then bird. Then camera.

“Bad.”

Tangle looked at heron. Then sky.

“Bird same. Light bad.”

“Exactly.”

Good. Road again. Around eleven, phone buzzed. Lena. Text. Found a Talbot reference. Call when you can. I stared. Tangle noticed.

“Paper?”

“Probably.”

Tangle made face. I pulled over at next safe turnout. Called. Lena answered fast.

“I found your Talbot.”

“That sounds threatening.”

“It gets better.”

Of course. She had been looking through hotel and company material. J. W. Talbot. Riverside House proprietor. Already known. But apparently

Talbot also served as local agent for North River Improvement Company for a period. I sat straighter.

"Agent how?"

"Not full employee, at least not that I can prove. More like local contact. Collected notices. Arranged rooms. Received correspondence. Possibly handled small payments."

There.

"That makes 'per Talbot' make sense."

"Exactly."

Tangle was watching me. I put phone on speaker. Lena continued.

"There's a company letter mentioning Talbot by name."

"What does it say?"

She read slowly.

"Please leave the road notices with Mr. Talbot at Riverside House. He will see them distributed and account for incidental expenses."

I looked at notebook. Incidental expenses. Views. Mounts. Hotel. Travel. Maybe.

"Date?"

"August 1891."

Before Mercer advertisement. Good. Then Lena said: "And another one." Of course.

"September 1891. Shorter."

She read:

"Mr. Talbot will advise when the photographer arrives."

I stopped. Tangle tilted head.

"The photographer?"

"No name."

Good. Still honest.

"Could be Mercer."

"Could."

"Could be someone else."

"Could."

"You're ruining this."

"I'm preserving your dignity."

"Unnecessary."

She laughed. Then: “But the timing is close.” Yes. Very. Talbot at Riverside House. Mercer advertising there. Company expecting “the photographer.” Voucher later paid to E. Mercer. That was no longer random overlap. Still not complete. But stronger.

I wrote: Talbot acted as local company contact. Company letter says Talbot will advise “when the photographer arrives.” September 1891. No name. Then: Possible chain: company → Talbot → photographer → views/mounts → voucher payment. Good. Not final. Lena said: “There may be another box.”

“Of course there is.”

“Correspondence from the successor company.”

“Do I want to know?”

“No.”

“Good.”

“You’ll look anyway.”

“Unfortunately.”

We hung up. Tangle pointed at phone.

“Mercer?”

“Maybe.”

They frowned. I pointed at notebook.

“Talbot.”

Tangle repeated: “Talbot.” Then: “Company.”

“Yes.”

“Mercer.”

“Maybe connected.”

Too many words. I drew three dots. Company. Talbot. Mercer. Then line from company to Talbot. Solid. Then line from Talbot to Mercer. Dotted. Tangle watched. Then took pencil. Looked at me first. I nodded. They added a line from Mercer to a small rectangle.

“Photo.”

“Yes.”

Then from rectangle back to company.

“Money.”

Close enough. I looked at diagram. Company. Talbot. Mercer. Photo. Company. Money. A loop. Not proof. But useful. Tangle pointed to dotted line.

“Wrong?”

“No.”

I thought.

"Unknown."

Tangle repeated: "Unknown." Good word. Then tapped solid line.

"Known."

I smiled.

"Exactly."

They wrote nothing. Just stared. Then: "Need known."

"Yes."

Simple. Better than half my notes. We stayed at turnout for lunch. No archive. No museum. Just sandwiches. Tangle looked at pickle.

"Bad."

"Correct."

Good. Blaze agreed. Katniss probably would have tried it. Echo would have weaponized it. Road after lunch got rougher. Not bad. Just old. Tangle watched suspension. Then floor.

"Van shake."

"Yes."

They pointed toward Echo enclosure.

"Echo less shake."

"Exactly."

Then at themselves.

"Tangle shake."

I laughed.

"Also exactly."

No elaborate solution required. We drove. By midafternoon, clouds broke. A long abandoned fence ran parallel to road. Nothing special. Then road curved and fence crossed shallow rise. One section had collapsed. Another stood. Behind it, distant mesa caught light. Camera. I stopped. Tangle came with me. First frame: too much sky. Second: collapsed fence dominated. Tangle pointed farther right.

I moved. Now upright fence section led toward lit mesa. Collapsed part stayed foreground. Better. Wait. Cloud moved. Mesa brightened. Fence stayed dark. Click. Keeper. Tangle nodded.

"Good now."

"You're becoming predictable."

Blank. Good. We drove another hour. Stopped at small town for groceries. Tangle came inside parking lot but not store. Still not comfortable with buildings. Fine. I bought food. Some fruit. More coffee. And

dried apricots. Tangle liked those. Outside, I handed one over. Tangle ate. Then pointed at store.

"Many food."

"Yes."

Then pouch.

"Too many."

I laughed.

"That's stores."

No understanding. Still true. At camp, Tangle helped without being asked. Not much. Moved loose branch from walking area. Placed water container closer to table. Tried to move chair. Chair folded unexpectedly. Tangle froze. Then unfolded it. Wrong. Tried again. Worse. I watched. They looked at me.

"Bad."

I laughed.

"Yes."

Tangle pointed at chair.

"Fix?"

"No."

They frowned. I showed latch. Fold. Unfold. Tangle watched once. Then did it. Correctly.

"Not broken."

Tangle looked offended by concept.

"Not broken?"

"No."

They folded it again. Unfolded. Then: "Why?" Fair.

"Storage."

Blank. I pointed at van. Chair folded. Inside. Chair open. Outside. Tangle nodded slowly.

"Small then big."

"Exactly."

They folded it again. This entertained them longer than it should have. Katniss watched with similar interest. Dangerous combination. Dinner. Tangle stayed. Again. No announcement. Good. After eating, I opened notebook. Not Mercer envelope. Just notebook. Tangle sat nearby. I drew diagram again. Company. Talbot. Mercer. Photographs. Payment. Tangle looked. Then pointed at Talbot.

"Where?"

"Hotel."

I drew crude building.

"Riverside House."

Tangle said: "House."

"Hotel."

"Hotel."

Good. Then Tangle pointed at Mercer.

"Home?"

I paused.

"Unknown."

Tangle nodded. Then: "Talbot home?"

"Hotel."

Tangle frowned. I realized.

"Work."

Point at hotel. "Talbot work." Then point at question mark by Mercer. "Mercer... unknown." Tangle thought. Then: "Mercer go hotel."

"Yes."

"Then go."

"Probably."

Tangle nodded.

"Moves."

"Yes."

That was heart of it. Mercer moved. Maybe no fixed studio. Maybe itinerant. Maybe worked circuit. I had known that generally. But now Talbot fit as temporary local anchor. Tangle pointed at road.

"Like Bone."

I stopped. Not same. But enough.

"Maybe."

Tangle grinned. Of course. I wrote: Mercer may have operated through temporary local contacts rather than permanent studio. Talbot could function as local business anchor. Then: Don't confuse itinerant with homeless. Don't assume. Good. Tangle watched.

"Many paper."

"Yes."

Then they pointed at diagram.

"Less paper."

I laughed.

"That's the goal."

No understanding. Then phone buzzed. Margaret. I smiled before answering.

"Hey."

"How's my loudmouth?"

Echo screamed from enclosure.

"Answering."

She laughed. We talked five minutes. Nothing heavy. Echo's whistle. Weather. Road. Then she asked: "Who's that?" Tangle had said: "Echo loud." I looked over.

"Tangle."

Pause.

"The one you've mentioned?"

"Yeah."

"Is Tangle inside?"

"Near."

Tangle looked at phone. I held it slightly away.

"This is Margaret."

Tangle said carefully: "Mar-gret." Margaret went silent. Then: "Well, hello, Tangle." Tangle looked at phone.

"Hello."

Margaret laughed softly.

"Okay. That's adorable."

Tangle looked at me. I shook head.

"Unknown."

Probably safer. Margaret asked how things were going.

"Slow."

"Good."

That word mattered. Slow was good. After call, Tangle pointed at phone.

"Family Echo."

"Yes."

Then: "Family Bone?" I thought.

"Friend."

Tangle nodded.

"Friend family Echo."

Close enough. Then Tangle pointed at Blaze. Katniss. Echo. Me.

“Family.”

“Yes.”

Then looked down. Long pause. I waited. Tangle touched own chest.

“Maybe.”

That was all. I didn’t answer quickly. Important. Then: “Maybe.” Tangle looked up. Good. No promise. No rejection. Just room. Later, camera note: Collapsed and standing fence / lit mesa beyond / dark foreground. Keeper. Mercer note: Talbot confirmed as local contact for North River Improvement Company. September letter: “Mr. Talbot will advise when the photographer arrives.” Photographer unnamed. Then: Tangle’s rule: known versus unknown. Need known.

I liked that. One more line: Tangle asked whether they might be family. I said maybe. I stared. Then added: Maybe is enough for now. Closed notebook. Tangle slept inside again. No question this time. They put pack beneath head. Staff beside them. Blaze nearby. Katniss above. Echo quiet. I turned off light. In dark: “Bone.”

“Yeah?”

“Maybe good.”

I smiled.

“Yeah.”

Maybe was good.

CHAPTER 63

What Stayed

Tangle was gone when I woke up. Blanket folded. Not well. But folded. Pack gone. Staff gone. One bottle cap left on table. Blue. Of course. I picked it up. A small hole had been punched through center. Not random. Threadable now. Useful. I put it beside coffee. Blaze stretched. Katniss occupied my pillow. Echo was already awake.

"Morning."

Bad whistle.

"Fair."

Tangle returned while I was making breakfast. Not from road. From behind trees. They stepped into camp carrying a handful of small green branches. Fresh camouflage.

"Morning."

"Morning."

They looked at bottle cap. Then at me.

"Useful."

"Eventually?"

Tangle nodded.

"Could."

Naturally. Breakfast. No questions about where Tangle had slept before. No questions about where they went at dawn. They came back. That was enough. After eating, Tangle sat near open van door. Katniss jumped down beside them. Closer now. Tangle stayed still. Katniss sniffed pouch. Then staff. Then one loose leaf tucked near shoulder. Tangle whispered: "Kat." Katniss looked up.

"Tangle."

Nothing. Then Katniss rubbed once against staff. Tangle froze. I watched. Blaze watched. Echo yelled. Katniss walked away like nothing had happened. Tangle looked at me.

"Friend?"

"Maybe."

Tangle smiled. Good. We left after nine. Tangle rode inside. Again. They had apparently decided that rain was not required. Road followed ridge. Then dropped into wider valley. Tangle watched. Blaze slept. Katniss watched Tangle sometimes. Echo mostly watched world. At one point Tangle pointed ahead.

"Town."

I looked. No town visible. Then saw utility lines. Five minutes later, roofs.

"You're annoying."

Blank. Good. Town was small. Gas. Post office. Cafe. Hardware. And laundromat. Important. I parked. Tangle stared at laundromat sign.

"Wash?"

"Clothes."

They looked at own patched clothes and fur camouflage.

"Why?"

Fair question.

"Smell."

Tangle sniffed sleeve. Then shrugged. I laughed.

"Different standards."

No understanding. Good. I did laundry. Tangle did not come inside. They sat with Blaze near van. Katniss stayed inside. Echo watched. Fifteen minutes later, I looked through window. Tangle was showing Blaze a washer. Blaze was not impressed. Good. Laundry took too long. Everything involving dryers did. I bought coffee from cafe next door. Tangle smelled it.

"Bad."

"You've made your position clear."

Tangle looked pleased. When laundry finished, we ate lunch outside. Tangle watched folded clothes.

"Small."

"Folded."

"Small."

"Yes."

Then pointed at unfolded towel.

"Big."

"Correct."

They folded it badly. Then better. Then perfectly enough to irritate me.

“Of course.”

Road again. No archive. No library. For almost three hours. That felt healthy. We stopped at a roadside overlook. Wide valley. Low agricultural fields. Rail line. Distant road. Tangle pointed at train before I heard it. Freight moved across valley. Small. Camera. Maybe. I waited. Train crossed through bright patch. Too obvious. I lowered camera. Tangle looked at me.

“No photo?”

“Too easy.”

Blank. I pointed at train. Then camera. Then shrugged.

“Not enough.”

Tangle thought. Then looked toward old fence in foreground. They moved three steps. Pointed. Fence post. Train behind. Road farther beyond. Layers. I raised camera again. Better. Waited. Train reached gap between posts. Click. Keeper. Tangle nodded.

“More.”

“Yes.”

“Train same.”

“Yes.”

“Place more.”

I smiled.

“Exactly.”

Tangle was getting dangerous with photography. We stayed fifteen minutes. Nothing else needed photographing. Good. Back in van, my phone buzzed. Lena. Another message. Found one more reference. Not a solution. Call when stopped. I showed Tangle.

“Paper.”

They sighed. I laughed.

“You’re learning.”

We stopped later at rest area. I called. Lena answered: “Still alive?”

“Barely.”

“I found a hotel register copy.”

Riverside House. Names. Dates. Commercial travelers.

“Mercer?”

“Maybe.”

Of course. She sent image. I opened. Page was bad. Ink faded. Several names. Initials. Destinations. Then: E. Mercer There. Arrival date matched week of advertisement. Departure three days later. Occupation column: Photog. I stared.

"That's pretty direct."

"Yeah."

"No first name."

"No."

"No hometown?"

"That's where it gets interesting."

Column marked residence. The entry was hard to read. Could be: Port T— Or: Pt. T— Or maybe something else. Not enough. Good. Lena said: "I wouldn't publish it as anything."

"I won't."

But now we had: E. Mercer. Photographer. Stayed at Riverside House. Same week. Company expecting photographer. Voucher paid E. Mercer. No longer theoretical. Mercer had been there. I wrote: Riverside House register confirms E. Mercer, occupation Photog., during advertisement period. Residence field illegible/uncertain. Then: Talbot likely local contact between company and Mercer. Likely. Tangle looked at screen.

"Known?"

"More known."

Tangle nodded.

"Good."

Then pointed at residence column.

"Unknown."

"Yes."

"Need known."

"Eventually."

Tangle had learned eventually. Apparently.

"Eventually."

Good. I closed phone. No more Mercer today. That decision lasted. Mostly. Afternoon road climbed again. Tangle watched terrain. At one pullout, they left van and disappeared into brush. No explanation. I waited. Blaze waited. Katniss watched. Ten minutes. Fifteen. I did not go looking. Good. Twenty minutes later Tangle came back with a bundle of dry stems.

They opened pouch. Removed green ones. Replaced some. Different terrain. Different camouflage.

“Here.”

“Yes.”

That was enough. We drove. At camp, Tangle helped set out dinner things. Not because asked. Water here. Food there. Then stopped. They had placed spoon next to my notebook. I moved spoon. Tangle moved notebook. I looked. They looked.

“Why?”

Tangle pointed.

“Food here.”

Then notebook.

“Paper there.”

That was reasonable. I moved notebook.

“Fine.”

Tangle smiled. Dangerous. After dinner, we sat. No Mercer papers. Just evening. Echo made soft noises. Katniss groomed. Blaze slept. Tangle worked on staff. The little punched blue bottle cap came out. I watched. They threaded cord through it. Then fixed it to pouch strap. Not decoration. They used cap like washer to keep frayed cloth from pulling through knot.

Ah.

“Useful.”

Tangle nodded.

“Very.”

Good. Later, Tangle pointed at camera.

“Photo today.”

“Yes.”

I showed image. Fence post foreground. Train crossing valley. Road beyond. Tangle looked.

“Place more.”

“Yes.”

Then: “Bone wait less.” I stared.

“Excuse me?”

Tangle grinned. Apparently humor was improving too. I closed camera. Phone rang. Margaret. Again. I answered.

“Hey.”

“Did I catch you at a good time?”

“Depends.”

“Is Echo behaving?”

"No."

"Then everything's normal."

We talked. Echo's routine. Weather. Road. Then Margaret asked: "How's your little shadow?" I looked at Tangle. They were trying to repair something that wasn't broken. A spoon. Probably.

"Closer."

"Inside again?"

"Yeah."

"That seems significant."

"Maybe."

Margaret laughed.

"You've been spending too much time around them."

"Probably."

Then: "Are they staying?" I looked at Tangle. No. Wrong question.

"I don't think that's how this is happening."

Margaret went quiet.

"What do you mean?"

"I think they're just... here more."

"That's staying."

"Not necessarily."

Tangle looked over. I lowered voice a little.

"They haven't asked to join anything. I haven't asked them to."

Margaret thought.

"Fair."

"They had a life before us."

"Do you know much about it?"

"No."

"Have you asked?"

"Not yet."

Another pause.

"That also seems fair."

Good. We hung up. Tangle pointed at phone.

"Mar-gret."

"Yes."

"Family Echo."

"Yes."

Then: “Ask?” I frowned.

“What?”

Tangle pointed at me. Then phone. Then themselves.

“Ask Tangle?”

I understood.

“About you?”

Tangle nodded.

“Yes.”

Then they pointed to me.

“Bone say?”

“You’re annoying.”

Blank. I smiled.

“Friend.”

Tangle watched.

“Maybe family?”

There it was.

“Maybe.”

Tangle nodded. Not disappointed. Not relieved. Just accepted. Good. Dark settled. Tangle made bed on floor again. Pack under head. Staff beside them. No question this time. That could have worried me. It didn’t. I opened notebook. Mercer: Riverside House register: E. Mercer, occupation “Photog.” during relevant week. Residence entry uncertain. Directly places Mercer at hotel.

Then: Talbot-company-Mercer chain now strongly supported, though Talbot’s exact role in commission/payment still not fully documented. Good. Photography: Fence post / freight train across valley / road beyond. Keeper. Tangle saw the layered composition first. Then Tangle: Stayed inside again without asking. I did not object. I stared. Then added: Maybe that is how some things happen.

Too sentimental. I nearly crossed it out. Didn’t. Lights off. Blaze sleeping. Katniss above. Echo quiet. Tangle below. Four companions. No. Not yet. I corrected myself mentally. Three companions. One Tangle. Then Tangle said from floor: “Bone.”

“Yeah?”

“Tomorrow go?”

“Probably.”

Silence. Then: “Tangle go.” I smiled in dark.

“Okay.”

That was all.

CHAPTER 64

What Was Already There

Tangle found the straps. Not intentionally. Probably. We had stopped near a small county park for lunch. Nothing dramatic. Nothing historic. Nothing involving Mercer. Healthy. Blaze had eaten. Katniss had eaten. Echo had eaten. Tangle had eaten everything except pickle. Consistency. I was looking for an old towel. Not interesting.

The storage compartment beneath one bench had become one of those places where useful things went to become difficult to find. Towel. Spare cord. Old book. First-aid kit. Something that might have been a glove. Then: straps. Blue and black. Thin. Small. Metal clips. I pulled them out. Tangle leaned over.

"What?"

"Exactly."

I turned bundle around. Not dog harness. Too small. Not cat harness. Wrong shape. Echo watched from enclosure. I looked at him.

"No."

He whistled. Tangle touched one strap.

"Echo?"

I looked again. Maybe. There were small loops. A narrow chest piece. Light tether clip.

"Huh."

I laid it on table. Tangle stared.

"Fix?"

"Maybe not broken."

Tangle frowned. They still disliked that concept. I took phone photo. Sent to Margaret. Any idea what this is? Three dots appeared. Stopped. Appeared again. Then: Oh my God. Good start. What? I forgot about that. Worse. Encouraging. A pause. Then: It's Echo's outdoor harness. Diane used it with him years ago. I looked at Echo. He looked at me.

I looked back at phone. He already had one? Margaret replied: Apparently you spent weeks solving problems Diane solved a long time ago. I laughed. Tangle looked at me.

“Funny?”

“Painful.”

Blank. I showed them phone photo. Pointed at Echo.

“His.”

Tangle nodded slowly.

“Echo outside.”

“Apparently.”

Margaret called. I answered.

“You sound annoyed.”

“I’m delighted.”

“That tone says otherwise.”

“I designed a permanent bird enclosure.”

“Which he needed.”

“Yes.”

“You made travel safe.”

“Yes.”

“And now you’re angry because Diane also made outside safe.”

I looked at straps.

“Not angry.”

“You’re Bone-angry.”

Tangle watched. I said: “That’s apparently a category.” Margaret laughed. Then she got practical.

“Diane used that harness when she took him outside. Not constantly. Mostly yard, porch, sometimes walks.”

“Was he comfortable in it?”

“He was. Back then.”

Important.

“How old is it?”

“Old enough that I’d inspect every stitch before trusting it.”

Good.

“That part I can do.”

“And maybe replace tether.”

“Also yes.”

Then: “Don’t assume because he remembers it that it still fits.”

"I won't."

Pause. Then Margaret said: "And before you ask, no, I did not deliberately hide it to make you build a bird condominium first." I laughed.

"Tangle heard that."

"Good."

Tangle said: "Bird house." Margaret went quiet. Then laughed harder.

"Okay. I like Tangle."

Tangle looked at phone.

"Mar-gret."

"Hi, Tangle."

"Hello."

Good. Margaret explained a little more. The harness had come with some of Diane's old things. Probably got packed during transfer. Forgotten under towels. Not conspiracy. Fine. After call, I inspected it. Stitching intact. Some wear. One elastic section questionable. Tether older than I liked. So: not today. Good.

I wrote: Echo harness found among his things. Previously used by Diane. Inspect/replace worn parts before use. No need to reinvent this. Tangle pointed at note.

"Paper."

"Yes."

"Bad."

"Also yes."

Then they picked up one loose strap. I held hand out.

"No."

Tangle froze. I softened voice.

"Sorry. Not yours."

They nodded.

"Echo."

"Yes."

Good. No issue. We packed it separately. Road. Tangle rode inside. Echo watched straps disappear into cabinet. Maybe he remembered. Maybe not. No need to decide today. Blaze slept. Katniss took passenger seat. Tangle watched road. An hour later, Tangle pointed at dashboard.

"Name?"

I glanced over.

"What?"

They touched dash.

“Van name.”

There it was.

“No name.”

Tangle frowned.

“Why?”

I looked at road.

“No reason.”

Too many words. I pointed at van. Shook head.

“No name.”

Tangle pointed at Blaze. “Blaze.” Katniss. “Kat-niss.” Echo. “Echo.” Me. “Bone.” Then dashboard. Nothing. They looked personally offended.

“Van.”

“Van.”

“Name.”

“No.”

Tangle stared.

“Bad.”

I laughed.

“You’re probably right.”

They did not understand. Then Tangle leaned back.

“Need name.”

Maybe. Not today. We kept driving. Late afternoon brought a long section of two-lane road through open desert. Low shrubs. Distant ridges. Clouds building west. I stopped at overlook. Camera. No hurry. Tangle came with me. The road curved away through pale ground. First frame. Too empty. Second. More foreground rock. Tangle pointed toward old dead yucca stalk leaning into frame.

I moved. Now stalk at edge. Road beyond. Ridge under cloud. Wait. Light moved across road in one narrow band. Click. Keeper. Tangle nodded.

“Road for eyes.”

“Yes.”

Good. Back at van, I pulled notebook from bag. Ellen’s compass slipped out with it. Hit table. Tangle picked it up before it rolled. Then stopped.

“Mine?”

They asked.

“Mine.”

Tangle handed it back immediately. Good. I turned compass over. Brass worn dark. Scratches. Small patches of dirt still worked into back. I rubbed thumb across one. Something caught. Not scratch. Letter. I rubbed harder. W. I stopped. Tangle noticed.

"What?"

I rubbed more dirt away. A. Y. Then more. F. I. N. D. E. R. I stared. WAYFINDER Small. Worn. Engraved shallow. Not decorative. Almost hidden. Tangle leaned closer.

"Word?"

"Yeah."

"What?"

I looked through windshield. At old van. Faded paint. Patina. Rust. Everything Ray had kept. Everything Ellen had touched. Everything we had added without trying to erase what came before. Then back at compass.

"Wayfinder."

Tangle repeated carefully.

"Way...finder."

I nodded. They followed my eyes to dashboard.

"Van name?"

I smiled.

"I think maybe it always was."

Tangle understood maybe. Good. They touched dash lightly.

"Wayfinder."

Echo whistled. Blaze slept. Katniss occupied passenger seat. The old van idled beneath us. Wayfinder. It fit too easily. That made me suspicious. Still. I opened notebook. Wrote: WAYFINDER Then below: Found engraved on back of Ellen's compass beneath grime. I stared at word. Not invented. Found. Better. Tangle leaned over.

"Known."

I looked at them.

"Yeah."

Known. We drove again. First time I thought it naturally: Wayfinder turned east. That was strange. Good strange. At camp, I did not tell anyone. There was nobody to tell except people already there. Then I remembered Ray. I took phone photo of compass. Not artistic. Just clear. Sent it. Found this on back. Did you know? No response immediately.

Dinner. Tangle ate. Blaze leaned. Katniss watched. Echo complained about something invisible. Phone buzzed. Ray. Ellen named the compass that. I stared. Another message. Said every good trip needs something that helps you find a way, not necessarily the way. That landed. Then: Never thought of van that way, but she probably would've liked it. I looked at Wayfinder.

Tangle saw face.

"Good?"

"Yeah."

Very. I typed: I think that's its name now. Ray replied: About time. Of course. I laughed. Tangle pointed.

"Ray?"

"Friend."

"Wayfinder friend?"

I thought.

"His first."

Too much. I pointed back. Then van. Then myself.

"Before Bone."

Tangle nodded.

"Old family."

I stopped. Maybe.

"Yeah."

That was close enough. After dinner, I checked Echo harness again. Tangle watched. I replaced old tether with newer lightweight line from supplies. One worn elastic section would need replacement. Easy. Just maintenance. Margaret texted: Send me a picture when he wears it again. Diane would get a kick out of that. I replied: I will. Not tonight.

Tangle slept inside. Normal now. Before lights out, I wrote: Van name: Wayfinder. Then: Echo's old outdoor harness found. Diane had already trained him to it. Replace worn section before use. Then today's photograph: Desert road / dead yucca stalk / distant ridge / narrow band of light. Keeper. Then I stared at page. Wayfinder. No quotation marks. No maybe. Just name.

I closed notebook. Tangle spoke from floor.

"Wayfinder."

"Yeah."

"Home."

I looked around. Blaze. Katniss. Echo. Tangle. Old wood. Old curtains. New enclosure. Camera. Books. Mercer envelope. Ellen's compass.

“Yeah.”
Wayfinder. Home. Close enough.

CHAPTER 65

The Thing That Already Knew How

The replacement elastic took twelve minutes. Which meant the project was already superior to most projects involving Echo. I sat at the table with old harness. New elastic. Needle. Thread. Small pliers. Tangle watched.

"Fix."

"Maintenance."

Blank.

"Fix."

"Fine."

Echo climbed around enclosure. Apparently aware something involving him was happening. That made him louder. Blaze slept through it. Katniss did not. She sat on bench watching every movement of strap. I pointed at her.

"No."

Katniss blinked. Tangle pointed at harness.

"Echo."

"Yes."

Then Katniss.

"Not Kat."

"Exactly."

Good. I finished stitching. Pulled hard. Held. Checked clip. Checked tether. Checked old seams. Good enough. I held harness up. Echo went quiet. Interesting.

"Remember this?"

He leaned forward. Then climbed toward enclosure door. Maybe. I opened it. Tangle moved back. Blaze stayed where he was. Katniss was

on other side of divider. Routine. No speech required. Echo stepped onto my hand. Harness in other. He looked at it. Then bit it.

"Promising."

Tangle laughed. I brought harness closer. Echo stopped biting. Lifted one foot. I froze.

"No way."

Echo stepped through opening. Not perfectly. Not elegantly. But deliberately. Tangle's ears went up.

"Know."

"Apparently."

I adjusted chest strap. Echo complained once. Then settled. No panic. No wrestling. No fifteen-stage approval process. Excellent. I clipped lightweight line. Echo looked at clip. Then at me. Bad whistle.

"Agreed."

We went outside. Not trail yet. Just camp. Echo on hand. Tether loose. He stepped to wrist. Then shoulder. Same bird. Different hardware. Good. Tangle circled slowly. Not crowding.

"Echo walk?"

"Sort of."

Blank. I pointed at Echo. Then sky. Then line.

"Fly. Safe."

Tangle touched cord lightly between two fingers.

"Stay."

"Yes."

Echo launched. Short. Hand to low branch. Line followed. My grip tightened. Unnecessary. Echo landed. Looked around. Then gave Diane's three-note whistle. I answered. Closer than before. Tangle looked between us.

"Talk."

"Apparently."

Echo hopped along branch. Then flew back. Shoulder. No drama. I looked at harness.

"Well."

Tangle nodded.

"Already knew."

I looked at them.

"Exactly."

That was probably the theme lately. Things already there. Names. Skills. Answers. Sometimes I was just late. We tried short walk. Blaze on leash where required. Katniss on long line. Echo on shoulder with flight tether. Tangle carrying staff. Just movement. The trail stayed easy. Open. Dry. Echo rode most of it. Once he flew from shoulder to low branch. Then back.

Katniss noticed. Very much. Her whole body changed. I shortened her line. Tangle saw.

"Kat wants Echo."

"Yes."

"Bad."

"Potentially."

Blank.

"Maybe very bad."

Tangle nodded solemnly.

"Very bad."

Good. Then they walked between Katniss and Echo for several minutes. Not necessary. But thoughtful. Blaze found something dead. I said no. Tangle said: "Blaze food?"

"No."

Blaze disagreed. The group continued. At one overlook, wind picked up. Echo leaned into it. Harness line moved. He opened wings. Did not launch. Just felt air. I watched him. Tangle watched too.

"Like."

"Yeah."

Echo gave three notes. Wind took them. Good. I did not photograph it. Some things were better experienced than collected. We walked another half mile. No problems. Back at Wayfinder, Echo stepped from shoulder to hand. Then directly toward enclosure.

"You're kidding."

He climbed inside. Tangle looked at me.

"Echo home."

"Apparently."

Good. Harness came off. No fight. Done. That solved something we had spent far too long pretending needed to be invented. I put harness in cabinet. Easy to reach. Then wrote one line: Echo remembers outdoor harness. Short walk successful. Use as normal trail routine. That was enough. No charts. No evaluation schedule. No committee. Perfect. Road. Wayfinder.

Still strange to think name. Not wrong. Just new. Tangle touched dashboard once as we pulled out.

“Wayfinder.”

“Yep.”

Blaze slept. Katniss passenger seat. Echo ate. Good. We drove two hours. No research. Then Tangle found Mercer. Not intentionally. Probably. I had left notebook open beside me at lunch. One page showed diagram. Company. Talbot. Mercer. Photos. Money. Tangle looked.

“Need known.”

“Still.”

They sat. Then pointed at per Talbot.

“Talbot say Mercer?”

I stopped.

“Maybe.”

Tangle frowned.

“No maybe.”

I laughed.

“That’s the problem.”

They pointed at word. Then at Mercer name.

“Talbot know Mercer?”

That was better. Did Talbot know Mercer? Almost certainly, if Mercer stayed at hotel. But documentation? I opened phone notes. Hotel register. Company letter. Voucher. Advertisement. Talbot was everywhere around transaction. But no direct statement: Talbot arranged Mercer. Talbot hired Mercer. Talbot paid Mercer. Interesting. Tangle tapped notebook.

“Need Talbot paper.”

I stared. Of course. Not more Mercer. More Talbot.

“That’s actually good.”

Tangle grinned.

“Good.”

I wrote: Search Talbot correspondence / hotel records for direct Mercer reference. Then closed notebook.

“Later.”

Tangle nodded.

“Later.”

Progress. Afternoon road crossed open country. Wayfinder rattled once. I waited. No second rattle. Good. Probably not spoon. Probably. We stopped near old cattle gate. Not because historic. Because sky. Storm clouds far east. Sun behind us. The gate itself was nothing. But rain fell beneath distant clouds without reaching ground. Virga. I brought camera. Tangle came. First frame: too much gate.

Second: too much sky. Tangle pointed toward fence wire.

"Road for eyes."

"Not a road."

They stared.

"Eyes."

Fair. I moved lower. Wire line led toward rain. Better. Waited. Sun caught the falling streaks. Click. Keeper. Tangle nodded.

"Good now."

"You're insufferable."

Blank. Good. At camp, we did not immediately settle. Short walk first. Same trail setup. Blaze. Katniss. Echo. Tangle. This time Echo launched twice. Short. Controlled. Shoulder to branch. Branch to hand. Katniss noticed. Long line shortened. No lecture. Everyone lived. Good. Then Echo flew from low branch directly to Tangle's staff. I froze. Tangle froze. Echo perched.

Tangle looked at me. I looked at Tangle.

"Don't move."

Tangle whispered: "Not move." Echo climbed higher on staff. Tangle's eyes crossed trying to look upward. I laughed. Echo bad-whistled. Tangle copied. Of course. Blaze watched. Katniss watched. I kept Katniss close. Echo stayed maybe ten seconds. Then flew back to my forearm. Tangle exhaled.

"Echo heavy."

"He weighs almost nothing."

Blank. Tangle rubbed wrist dramatically.

"Very heavy."

I laughed. Okay. Humor definitely improving. At dinner, Tangle sat at table. Not near. At. I noticed. Said nothing. Good. Katniss jumped onto bench beside them. Blaze beneath table. Echo secure. Five. I stopped counting. Better. Phone buzzed. Ray. How's Wayfinder treating you? I stared at message. First time anyone else had called van that. It made name settle.

I replied: Still old. Still running. Still not a food truck. Three dots. Ellen would've approved. That was enough. Tangle looked.

“Ray?”

“Yeah.”

“Wayfinder old family.”

“Yeah.”

They nodded. Then pointed at us.

“New family.”

I looked around. Blaze under table. Katniss beside Tangle. Echo inside. Wayfinder around all of us.

“Maybe.”

Tangle smiled.

“Maybe good.”

“Yeah.”

After dark, notebook. Echo: Old outdoor harness remembered immediately. Short trail walk. No need to make this complicated. Mercer: Tangle asked better question: did Talbot personally know/arrange Mercer? Search Talbot-side records for direct connection. Photography: Old gate / fence wire leading toward virga / late light catching falling rain. Keeper. Then: Tangle sat at table for dinner. No explanation.

Didn’t need one. I closed notebook. Tangle made bed on floor. Then stopped. Looked at table. Looked at me.

“Tomorrow?”

“Yeah.”

“Walk?”

“Probably.”

“Echo fly?”

“Probably.”

Tangle nodded.

“Good.”

Lights out. Wayfinder settled around us. No mystery. No decision. Just road tomorrow.

CHAPTER 66

The Question on the Other Side

Morning came clear. No rain. No wind. No mysterious object on the step. I checked anyway. Nothing. Good. Probably. Tangle was awake. Sitting at table. At table. Not near. Not beside. At. Blaze was under it. Katniss was on bench. Echo was eating. Nobody had apparently discussed seating arrangements. They had simply happened. I made coffee. Tangle watched.

"Bad."

"Every morning."

"Always bad."

"Yes."

They nodded. Important knowledge. Breakfast was quiet. Then Tangle pointed at Mercer envelope. I looked at it.

"No."

Tangle smiled.

"Later."

"Much later."

Blank.

"Later."

Good enough. We walked first. Blaze. Katniss. Echo. Tangle. No special discussion about how everyone traveled. We already knew. Echo spent most of walk on my shoulder. Occasionally branch. Then back. Katniss explored. Blaze smelled everything. Tangle fixed nothing. Excellent. At one bend in trail, Tangle stopped. Not because broken. They were listening.

"What?"

Tangle pointed uphill.

"People."

I heard nothing. Thirty seconds later: voices. Hikers came around bend. Three of them. They saw me first. Then Blaze. Katniss. Echo. Then Tangle. All three stopped. Fair. Tangle stepped slightly behind me. Not hiding. Choosing position. One hiker looked at Tangle. Then at me.

"Is that...?"

"No idea."

Probably not best answer. The hiker laughed nervously. Tangle looked at them.

"Morning."

All three stared. Then one said: "Morning." Good. Nobody asked species. Nobody asked origin. Nobody asked why a small fur-covered person with enormous ears was holding a staff. I appreciated restraint. One hiker pointed at Echo.

"Beautiful bird."

Echo screamed.

"Thank you."

Tangle said: "Loud." That got laugh. Good. We moved on. Tangle looked back once. Then at me.

"People afraid?"

"Maybe surprised."

Too many words. I pointed at Tangle. Then mimed surprise.

"New."

Tangle nodded.

"New to people."

"Yes."

They thought about that. Then: "Bad?"

"No."

That one was easy. Tangle looked at trail.

"Good."

We kept walking. Back at Wayfinder, I checked phone. Message from Lena. I may have found Talbot correspondence. Call me when you're somewhere you can sit down. I looked at table. Tangle followed my eyes.

"Paper."

"Yes."

They sighed.

"Very bad."

"Unfortunately."

We drove twenty miles first. Because I had learned something. Maybe. Then stopped at shaded pullout. Called. Lena answered immediately.

“You sitting?”

“Technically.”

“Good.”

She had found a small packet of copied correspondence. Not original. Transcribed and later photocopied. Talbot. Riverside House. Most boring. Rooms. Freight. Stage arrivals. Supplies. Then one letter. Addressed to North River Improvement Company. From J. W. Talbot. September.

Lena read: “The photographer Mercer arrived Tuesday evening and has begun making the requested views along the river road and ferry approach. Weather permitting, he expects to finish the first set before the end of the week.” I did not say anything. Tangle leaned closer. Lena continued.

“There’s more.”

Of course.

“He asks that the mounts be sent ahead from the city if convenient, as his present supply is insufficient.”

There. Direct. Mercer. Company. Requested views. Talbot. Work. Mounts. All in one place. I stared through windshield. Wayfinder sat quiet. Tangle said softly: “Known.”

“Yeah.”

Lena heard.

“That Tangle?”

“Yeah.”

“Tell Tangle they win.”

Tangle looked at phone.

“Win?”

“Later.”

Lena laughed. I asked: “Anything identifying Mercer beyond the initial?”

“No.”

“Residence?”

“No.”

“Gender?”

“No.”

“Studio?”

“No.”

Good. The mystery had narrowed. Not disappeared. But one entire question was now answered. E. Mercer had been commissioned. At least for those views. By North River Improvement Company. Through Talbot as local contact. No more maybe. I wrote: Confirmed: Talbot letter names "the photographer Mercer" and states Mercer began making requested views along river road and ferry approach. Mounts requested from city.

Then: This directly establishes company commission. Tangle pointed at note.

"Known."

"Known."

Then Tangle pointed at remaining page.

"Who Mercer?"

I looked at them.

"Still unknown."

Tangle nodded.

"Need known."

"Eventually."

They accepted. Lena said: "There's one other thing." Naturally.

"The letter says 'mounts sent ahead from the city.'"

"Which city?"

"Doesn't say."

Of course. But that implied supply network. Maybe studio. Maybe supplier. Maybe previous base. Something. I wrote: Find mount supplier / city source if possible. Could lead toward Mercer base. Good. Then I stopped.

"No more today."

Lena laughed.

"I was waiting for that."

We hung up. Tangle looked at me.

"Happy."

I thought.

"Yes."

Then: "Still not done." Tangle nodded.

"Good."

I frowned.

"Why good?"

Tangle searched. Then: "Done... no more." I stared.

"You like the mystery."

Blank. I pointed at papers. Then head. Then smiled.

"Interesting."

Tangle nodded.

"Interesting."

Fair. Road. We drove. No research. Wayfinder climbed through low pass. Tangle sat by window. Then asked: "Bone from where?" I looked over. We had touched this before.

"Far away."

Tangle frowned.

"Where?"

More English now. Enough. I pointed generally.

"Born in one place. Lived many places."

Tangle listened.

"Many."

"Yes."

Then they pointed toward road.

"Bone choose road."

"Eventually."

Tangle nodded. Then looked out window. I knew the return question. It sat there. I waited. Not because afraid to ask. Because I wanted it to be a question, not an interrogation. A few miles later: "Tangle." They looked over.

"Where are you from?"

They understood. Immediately. Everything changed. Not dramatically. Ears lowered slightly. Hands went still. Then eyes toward window. Long pause.

"Cannot tell."

Simple. Clear. I nodded.

"Okay."

Tangle looked at me. Maybe expecting more. I didn't give more. After a while: "Not safe." I waited.

"My people."

There it was. No explanation. Didn't need one.

"Okay."

Tangle kept watching me. Then: "Bone not ask?"

"No."

They thought.

“Why?”

I shrugged.

“Because you said no.”

Too many words. I simplified.

“Tangle says no. Bone stops.”

Tangle stared. Then nodded slowly.

“Good.”

That was enough. I did not ask species. I did not ask family. I did not ask where. I definitely did not ask anything else that did not matter. Road continued. After twenty minutes, Tangle pointed ahead.

“Photo.”

I laughed.

“You changing subject?”

Blank. Probably. We stopped. A shallow basin opened below us. Old dirt track. Dark ridge. Clouds casting long shadow. No obvious subject. Tangle pointed at one pale line where track curved through darker ground.

“Road for eyes.”

“Again?”

They nodded. Camera. First frame too wide. Moved lower. Track entered from corner. Curved toward ridge. Wait. Sunlight slipped through break. Not on ridge. On one bend of track. Click. Keeper. Tangle looked.

“Good.”

“Yeah.”

No more frames. Good. Later, we stopped for groceries. Tangle waited outside. Still preferred open air. Fine. I bought fruit. Bread. Coffee. Food for everyone. Pickles. Tangle stared at jar.

“Why?”

I laughed.

“Because I like them.”

Blank. I pointed at self. “Bone food.” Then pickle. “Good.” Tangle shook head.

“Bone wrong.”

I stared. Blaze looked interested.

“Excuse me?”

Tangle grinned. English was becoming dangerous. At camp, we ate. Tangle sat at table again. Normal. Echo spent some time outside with

us. No event. No crisis. Good. Katniss ignored him enough to be reassuring. Not enough to be trusted. Also good. After dinner, I opened Mercer papers. Not many. Talbot letter transcription. Voucher. Advertisement. Hotel register. Tangle watched.

I laid them out. No touching yet.

"Known." I pointed.

Talbot letter.

"Known." Voucher.

"Known." Hotel register.

Then old residence field. Illegible.

"Unknown."

Tangle nodded. Then I pointed at: mounts sent ahead from the city

"Unknown."

Tangle leaned in.

"City."

"Yes."

Then looked at hotel register. Residence field. Then at mount note. Then moved both together. I felt it immediately.

"Maybe same city."

Tangle nodded.

"Maybe."

Good. I wrote: Compare illegible residence field with likely cities supplying photographic mounts in route corridor. Could constrain reading. Useful. Then Tangle took one Mercer photograph. Looked at back. Mount. Edges. Then another. Same. Then another. They stacked by size. Not date. Not subject. Not number. Size. I watched. All six were almost same. Not identical. Two slightly larger.

Tangle separated those. Then pointed at mount thickness.

"Not same."

I leaned closer. They were right. Two had slightly different card stock. Different batch? Different supplier? Different period? Maybe. I wrote: Mounts not identical: two appear slightly larger/thicker. Could indicate multiple batches/suppliers/time periods. Verify, don't assume. Tangle watched. Then moved photos again. Not yet chaos. Just grouping. I let them. Important. They ended with two piles. Four. Two.

"Why?"

Tangle tapped larger pair.

"Later."

I laughed.

"Fair."

We left them that way for now. That felt significant. Not because solved. Because I didn't immediately put them back. Progress. Dark came. Tangle slept inside. No question. Before lights out, notebook: Confirmed company commission through Talbot letter.

Then: Asked Tangle where they come from. Answer: "Cannot tell. Not safe. My people." Did not press. I stopped. Considered whether to write anything else. No. Then: Gender unknown. Not relevant. One line. Done. Photography: Dirt track / dark ridge / single lit bend. Keeper. Tangle saw composition first. Then Mercer: Tangle noticed two mount types among six known Mercer photographs. Verify.

I closed notebook. Tangle spoke from floor.

"Bone."

"Yeah?"

"Thank."

I looked down.

"For what?"

Blank. Tangle pointed vaguely. Back. Road. Themself. Then: "Stop." I understood. For not asking more.

"You're welcome."

Tangle nodded. Quiet. Wayfinder settled around us. One question answered. Another left alone. Both felt right.

CHAPTER 67

The Shape Between Things

Wayfinder had developed a new morning sound. Not mechanical. Worse. Echo had learned Tangle's two-note call. Tangle had learned Echo's bad whistle. They had apparently agreed to exchange them repeatedly before sunrise. I opened one eye.

"No."

Two notes. Bad whistle. Two notes. Bad whistle. Blaze sighed from floor. Katniss left. Smartest among us.

"Tangle."

Silence.

"Echo."

Silence. Good. I closed eye. Bad whistle.

"Fine."

Morning. Coffee. Breakfast. Fruit. Nectar. Nobody mentioned concert. Tangle sat at table. No longer remarkable. That was remarkable. I opened notebook. Yesterday's Mercer notes. Talbot letter. Company commission. Mount differences. Possible city supplier. Tangle leaned slightly.

"Paper?"

"Later."

They nodded. No argument. Then pointed at coffee.

"Bad."

"This conversation is getting repetitive."

Blank. Good. We left early. No destination. That had become easier again. For a while Mercer had turned every road into route toward archive. Today road was road. Wayfinder rolled through open country. Low hills. Dry washes. Long horizon. Echo rode quietly. Katniss watched window. Blaze slept. Tangle watched everything. Thirty miles passed. Then Tangle asked: "Mercer road?"

I looked over.

“What?”

They pointed ahead. Then made camera shape with hands.

“Mercer... road?”

I thought.

“Maybe.”

Tangle frowned. I laughed.

“Sorry.”

I pointed broadly.

“Mercer traveled roads.”

Tangle nodded. Then pointed at Wayfinder.

“Bone road.”

“Yes.”

Then at themselves.

“Tangle road.”

I looked at them.

“Apparently.”

Tangle smiled. Three travelers. Different reasons. Same asphalt. Interesting. I did not write it down. Progress. We stopped around ten near an old roadside pullout overlooking a dry riverbed. Not because history. Because Blaze stood up and stared at me. Communication. Outside. Blaze first. Katniss next. Echo with harness. Tangle with staff. Normal. The trail followed wash. Echo stayed on shoulder.

Tangle walked beside me. Katniss ranged ahead. Blaze found every smell ever created. Good. At a bend, Tangle stopped. They pointed at ground. Tracks. Coyote. Probably. Tangle crouched.

“Dog?”

“Not dog.”

I mimed ears. Tail. Wild.

“Coyote.”

Tangle tried word.

“Ky-oat.”

“Close.”

They stared at tracks. Then Blaze.

“Blaze coyote?”

“No.”

Tangle looked at Blaze. Then tracks. Then Blaze.

“Very no.”

I laughed.

“Correct.”

Blaze remained unconcerned. We kept walking. Echo flew to Tangle’s staff. Again. Tangle stopped automatically now. No panic.

“Heavy.”

“You’ve committed to that lie.”

Blank. Tangle grinned anyway. Echo moved to my shoulder. Good. At dry riverbed, wind had carved shallow lines through sand. Tangle pointed.

“Road for eyes.”

“No.”

They looked offended.

“Everything cannot be road for eyes.”

Blank. I drew line in air. Then pointed camera.

“Composition.”

Tangle repeated badly.

“Com...po...”

Then gave up.

“Road for eyes.”

I stared.

“Fine.”

We walked back. Wayfinder waited. No photo. Also good. Lunch came at a small town park. Tangle helped set food out. Katniss stole bench. Echo watched trees. Blaze slept under table. I found myself looking at group. Not counting. Better. Phone buzzed. Lena. I considered ignoring it. Tangle saw name.

“Paper.”

“Probably.”

They sighed. I answered.

“Please tell me you found nothing.”

“Bad news.”

“Excellent.”

“I found something.”

Of course. She had followed mount supplier clue. Not far. A photographic supply advertisement in city newspaper. Cabinet cards. Mounts. Dry plates. Chemicals. Mail orders. Several photographers around region used same supplier. No Mercer.

“That doesn’t help.”

"Wait."

Dangerous. One surviving North River company invoice listed: two dozen card mounts, No. 4 finish Supplier name matched advertisement.

"Company bought mounts directly?"

"Looks that way."

That mattered. If company supplied mounts, then differences in Mercer photo mounts might reflect company ordering batches. Not Mercer changing suppliers. I looked at Tangle. They were eating dried apricots. Lena continued.

"Invoice is October 1891."

After Mercer first set. Interesting.

"Could be replenishment."

"Could."

"Could be for someone else."

"Could."

"You're no fun."

"I've heard."

Then: "There's a second invoice in December." Different finish. Different thickness. I sat up.

"Two mount types."

"Yes."

Tangle looked over. I pointed at phone.

"Mounts."

Tangle immediately stopped eating. That was concerning. Lena said: "If your two thicker Mercer mounts match later batch, that might give you sequence." Not dates exactly. But relative. Maybe. I wrote: Company ordered at least two mount batches with different specifications. Compare six Mercer mounts to invoice descriptions. Could establish relative grouping. Good. Then asked: "Any numbers?"

"On invoice?"

"Yes."

"No."

Fine. We hung up. Tangle pointed at Mercer envelope.

"No."

They looked disappointed.

"Later."

"Later."

Good. We finished lunch. No immediate research. That mattered. Road again. The afternoon stayed plain. Good plain. A farm truck. Two motorcycles. One broken billboard. Wayfinder hummed. Tangle watched horizon. Then: “Bone.”

“Yeah?”

“Why photo?”

We had answered this before. Sort of.

“Because I like it.”

Blank. I pointed at camera. Then myself. Thumbs-up. Tangle nodded. Then: “Why keep?” Better question. I thought. Because memory. Because light. Because places disappeared. Because I liked proving I had seen them. Because sometimes a photograph let me notice what I hadn’t noticed while standing there. Too many words. I said: “Remember.” Tangle understood.

“Remember place.”

“Yes.”

Then I pointed at camera.

“Sometimes see later.”

Tangle tilted head. I showed old image from previous day. Dirt track. Lit bend. Then pointed outside.

“Later, see again.”

Tangle stared.

“Photo remember.”

I smiled.

“Yeah.”

They thought. Then tapped own head.

“Tangle remember.”

“Yes.”

Then camera.

“Bone need help.”

I stared. Tangle smiled. Humor. Definitely.

“You’re getting rude.”

No understanding. Probably. We stopped late afternoon near abandoned irrigation structure. Concrete channel. Old metal gate. Water gone. Light boring. I didn’t take camera. Tangle noticed.

“No photo.”

“No.”

“Good.”

I looked at them.

“Good?”

Tangle nodded.

“Bone wait less.”

They were enjoying this. Good. Camp before sunset. Open ground. Sparse trees. Enough space. Tangle walked perimeter with Blaze. Katniss stayed near Wayfinder. Echo out with harness. Routine. Then Tangle returned carrying nothing. That was suspicious.

“You okay?”

Blank. I pointed at empty hands.

“No useful?”

Tangle looked down. Then around.

“Already useful.”

I laughed.

“Fair.”

Dinner. Afterward, I finally opened Mercer envelope. Tangle was ready immediately. Too ready. I pulled six photo copies. Mount notes. Supplier invoices Lena had sent. Tangle moved closer. I put four thinner mount photos in one stack. Two thicker in another.

“Maybe these.”

Tangle looked. Then invoices. October. December. Different finishes. They compared. No magic. No immediate revelation. Good. Then Tangle separated photos differently. Three. One. Two. I frowned.

“Why?”

They pointed at subjects. First three: road. ferry approach. mill access. One: residence. Two: camp and bridge. I waited. Tangle moved residence photo beside advertisement: Orders for residences, mills, camps and improvements. Then looked at me.

“Order.”

I stopped.

“Order?”

Tangle tapped advertisement. Then photos.

“People ask.”

Commission types.

“Orders.”

Tangle nodded. Then moved mill photo to residence. Camp next. Bridge apart. Not sorted by time. Not by mount. By requested subject. Interesting.

"You're grouping by what people ordered."

Blank. I simplified.

"Who wanted photo."

Tangle nodded.

"Who."

That was the question we had asked weeks ago. Who paid. But maybe plural. Not one client. Several. North River Improvement Company paid for some. Other customers may have ordered others through Riverside House. I looked at six photos. Had I been assuming one Mercer series because they shared photographer? Yes. Maybe wrong.

I wrote: Do not assume six Mercer photographs belong to one commission. Advertisement solicited multiple categories/orders. Company commission may account for only some. Tangle watched.

"Better."

"Maybe."

They frowned.

"Bone maybe many."

I laughed.

"Yes."

Too many. Then Tangle took ferry approach photo. Bridge photo. Road photo. Placed together.

"Company?"

"Probably."

Tangle pointed at residence.

"Not company?"

"Maybe not."

They sighed dramatically. I deserved that. Then: "Need who."

"Yes."

Tangle pointed at back of residence photo. Blank copy. No inscription beyond Mercer.

"Who live?"

I stared. Residence owner. Of course. If the house could be identified, owner might appear in local directories. Then maybe order records. Not Mercer identity directly. But it could separate commercial jobs. I wrote: Identify residence in Mercer photograph. If owner identifiable, may establish separate private commission and help split corpus into jobs. Good. Then I looked at Tangle.

"You really are making this worse."

Blank. I pointed at paper pile. Then more piles.

“More.”

Tangle smiled.

“Fix.”

“No.”

“Fix.”

“Absolutely not.”

They laughed. Good. We worked another twenty minutes. Then stopped. Important. Papers remained in three piles. I did not return them to my old arrangement. Also important. After dark, Tangle took one sheet. Moved it six inches. I noticed. Said nothing. They moved another. Then stopped. Looked at me.

“Look?”

“Go ahead.”

Tangle nodded. Good. Not the moment. Not yet. But closer. I went outside with camera before light disappeared. No plan. The western horizon had a thin opening. Wayfinder sat dark against low ridge. I almost photographed van. Then didn’t. Too obvious. Instead I walked farther. A weathered irrigation wheel stood near abandoned channel. Small. Bent. Behind it, narrow opening in clouds lit only distant ridge.

First frame. Too centered. Moved left. Wheel became edge element. Channel led away. Ridge lit beyond. Wait. Light strengthened. Click. Keeper. One. Enough. Back at camp, Echo had moved to Tangle’s staff again. Tangle stood motionless.

“Very heavy.”

“Still false.”

Katniss watched. Blaze slept. I sat. No need to photograph. Later, notebook. Mercer: Possible mistake: treating all known Mercer photographs as one commission/series. Tangle grouped by likely customer/order type. Company commission may explain route/improvement views; residence/camp/etc. may be separate orders. Identify photographed residence/owners if possible. Then: Mount batch differences may reflect company-supplied mounts, not Mercer supplier change.

Then: Tangle now asks before moving Mercer material. I let them. Photography: Abandoned irrigation wheel at frame edge / empty channel leading toward briefly lit ridge. Keeper. Then I stopped. Tangle was already asleep. Blaze nearby. Katniss above. Echo quiet. Mercer papers remained on table. Three piles. Normally I would have put them away. I didn’t. Maybe because tired. Maybe because arrangement made sense.

Maybe because I trusted Tangle. Probably all three. I turned off light. In dark, paper shifted. Soft. I opened eyes. Tangle was awake. Sitting at table. Moving one page. Then another. I almost said something. Didn't. Tangle looked at me.

"Fix."

I stared.

"Tomorrow."

They nodded.

"Tomorrow."

And stopped.

CHAPTER 68

Wrong Order

Tangle started before breakfast. That was first mistake. Mine, probably. I woke to paper. Not sound. Paper. Mercer paper. Everywhere. Table. Bench. Floor. One sheet on passenger seat. Two photographs propped against coffee cup. Map unfolded across half the table. Newspaper clippings moved out of envelopes. Voucher copy upside down. Hotel register sideways. For one second, I did not understand what I was seeing.

Then I saw Tangle. Sitting in middle of it. Moving another photograph. Something in me went tight. Fast. Months. Libraries. Archives. Notes. Dates. Copies. Everything I had tried to keep separated enough to understand.

“Tangle! No!”

Sharp. Too sharp. Tangle froze. Blaze lifted his head. Katniss stopped halfway onto bench. Echo went silent. Tangle’s hands stayed above paper. Ears lowered. And immediately I hated sound of my own voice. I closed eyes.

“No.”

Quieter.

“That wasn’t—“

I stopped. Tangle watched me. I sat across table.

“I’m sorry.”

They did not move.

“I’ve been focused on this so long it’s almost become an obsession.”

Too many words. I knew that. Still needed saying.

“I had it where I almost understood it.”

Tangle looked at me. Not understanding all of sentence. Maybe almost none of it. But they understood tone. They understood apology. Good. I pointed at myself.

“Bone wrong.”

Tangle’s ears lifted slightly.

"Sorry."

They looked at papers. Then at me.

"Was wrong."

I frowned.

"What was?"

Tangle pointed at everything.

"Wrong."

Then searched. Their hand made small motion. Moving one sheet beside another.

"Order..."

Pause.

"Ordered."

Another pause. Then a small nod.

"Fixed it."

I stared.

"Tangle."

They waited.

"You rearranged it."

Blank. I pointed at papers. Moved hand around.

"You changed."

Tangle nodded.

"Was wrong."

Then: "Fixed." I almost told them no. Almost. Instead I looked. Really looked. First thing I noticed: dates were no longer together. That bothered me. 1890 beside 1892. September beside December. Hotel register nowhere near newspaper advertisement. Wrong. Then I noticed subjects. Road. Ferry approach. Bridge. Together. Mill. Camp. Together. Residence by itself. Then another group: voucher. Talbot letter. Company ledger. Mount invoices.

And another: hotel register. Riverside House advertisement. Stage route. Supplier advertisement. Not chronology. Relationships. I sat back. Tangle pointed at first group.

"Company."

Road. Ferry. Bridge.

"Yes."

Then mill and camp.

"Company?"

I hesitated.

“Maybe.”

Tangle made face. Fair. Then residence.

“Person.”

“Private customer.”

Blank. I pointed at imaginary person. Then money. Then photograph.

“Person asks.”

Tangle nodded.

“Order.”

There it was. Orders. Not one project. Not one series. Multiple jobs. I had been trying to reconstruct Mercer as if every photograph belonged to one coherent expedition. Why? Because six photographs survived together. That did not mean they began together.

I looked at advertisement: Orders for residences, mills, camps and improvements received at Riverside House. Tangle tapped it. Then tapped each photo group.

“Orders.”

I felt something shift.

“You’re right.”

Tangle nodded.

“Said.”

I looked at them. Of course.

“Yes. You did.”

Blaze lowered head again. Apparently crisis resolved. Katniss climbed onto bench. Echo gave one quiet whistle. I kept looking. The mount groups were different too. Four thinner. Two thicker. But Tangle had not simply separated them by thickness. One thick mount sat with road photographs. One with residence. So mount type was not client type. Good. Then why?

Tangle pointed at two supplier invoices. October. December. Different card stock. Different finish. Then photographs.

“Before.”

They tapped thinner group.

“After.”

Thicker.

“Maybe.”

They had learned that from me. Unfortunate. But possible. Different supply batches. Not photographer identity. Not separate photographers.

Just material availability. I wrote nothing yet. Tangle moved hotel register beside supplier advertisement. Then tapped a line I had nearly stopped noticing. Residence. Faded. Pt. A— Maybe. Tangle pointed at supplier ad. I looked. Harrow & Cole Photographic Supply. Address: Port Alder.

I stopped. No. Maybe. I pulled hotel register closer. The residence entry had always been frustrating. Pt. A— Could be Port Alder. Could be something else. Then Tangle pointed at Talbot letter: mounts be sent ahead from the city Then supplier invoice. Port Alder. Then residence field. Pt. A— Then looked at me.

"Same?"

My first answer arrived automatically.

"Maybe."

Tangle sighed. I deserved that too.

"Okay."

I leaned closer.

"If Mercer came from Port Alder..."

Too many words. I took map. Port Alder sat north and west of the river district. Rail connection. Stage connection. Large enough for photographic suppliers. I had treated it as supplier location. Not Mercer location. Why? Because I had been searching where Mercer worked. Not where Mercer returned. Tangle moved 1890 classified. Then 1891 Riverside advertisement. Then 1892 postcard.

Not in a straight route. They put Port Alder at center. Locations around it. Spokes. Not line. I stared. A circuit. Mercer wasn't necessarily traveling down one route. Mercer might have been leaving a base, working several districts, and returning. I whispered: "Wrong shape." Tangle looked at me. I drew line with finger.

"This."

Then crossed it out. Made circle. Spokes.

"This."

Tangle nodded enthusiastically.

"Wrong order."

"Yeah."

Not just wrong order. Wrong model. I reached for phone. Then stopped. Breakfast first. Important. Tangle stared.

"Later?"

"Ten minutes."

Blank. I held up ten fingers.

"Food."

Tangle considered. Then nodded.

"Food first."

Good. We ate with Mercer spread across half of Wayfinder. Carefully. Very carefully. Coffee stayed far away. Tangle watched cup.

"Bad."

"Especially today."

After breakfast I called Lena. She answered: "You're up early."

"I need a directory."

"Of course you do."

"Port Alder. Around 1890 to 1892."

Pause.

"Why Port Alder?"

"I'll tell you if I'm wrong."

"That's encouraging."

She had access to scanned regional directories through museum subscription. Searching took several minutes. I waited. Tangle waited. Katniss sat directly on one map corner. I moved map. Katniss moved with it.

"Helpful."

Then Lena came back.

"I've got 1891."

My grip tightened on phone.

"Mercer."

Keyboard. Pause.

"There's more than one."

Of course.

"Read them."

"Mercer, Charles. Carpenter."

No.

"Mercer, D. H. Grocer."

No. Then silence.

"Lena?"

"Hold on."

I waited. Then: "Mercer, Eleanor." Everything stopped.

"Occupation?"

Another pause.

"Photographer."

I looked at Tangle. They looked back. Lena continued.

"Address listed as rooms above Halpern's Stationery, East Market Street."

I sat. Already sitting. Still.

"Eleanor Mercer."

"That's what directory says."

First name. Finally. Not Ethel. Not Edward. Not Elias. Not mystery initial. Eleanor. I remembered an old note from much earlier. Do not assume E. Mercer was male. Good note. Lena said: "There's also a small business entry."

"What does it say?"

Keyboard. Then: "Mercer, Eleanor — photographic views, residences and outdoor work; orders taken locally or by correspondence." I laughed. Not loudly. Just once. There it was. Not hidden. Not secret. Just in the wrong directory. Wrong place. Wrong search. I had looked for permanent studios in districts where Mercer photographed. Mercer didn't have one there. Port Alder. Base. Correspondence. Travel.

"Anything in 1892?"

Lena searched.

"Still listed."

"1893?"

Pause.

"No."

Interesting. Not mysterious. Just gone from directory. Moved? Changed work? Married? Died? No need. Not every life needed complete biography.

"What about Harrow & Cole?"

"Same city. Three blocks away."

Of course. Mount supplier.

"Can you check whether residence field on hotel register could reasonably be Port Alder?"

She opened image.

"Yeah."

Pause.

"I'd call it probable, not certain from handwriting alone."

Good.

"But with directory?"

"Strong."

Good. I told her what Tangle had done. Long silence. Then Lena said: "So the small furry person reorganized your research."

"Yes."

"And found the photographer."

"Yes."

"How are you taking that?"

I looked at Tangle. They were stacking dried apricots by size.

"Poorly."

Lena laughed. I thanked her. Then asked for copies. She sent directory pages. Phone chimed. There. Mercer, Eleanor — photographer. I stared longer than necessary. Tangle pointed.

"Known?"

"Known."

Their face brightened.

"Mercer."

"Eleanor Mercer."

Tangle tried.

"El...nor."

"Close."

"Eleanor."

Better. Good enough. I took notebook. For months, the Mercer page had been questions. Now: Eleanor Mercer. Photographer. Port Alder. Then: 1891 directory: photographic views, residences and outdoor work; orders taken locally or by correspondence. Then: North River Improvement Company commissioned river-road/ferry-approach views through Talbot at Riverside House.

Then: Other surviving Mercer photographs likely represent separate commercial orders, not a single documentary series. Then: Company supplied at least some mounts; mount numbering/material differences are therefore not reliable indicators of Mercer's personal sequence. I stopped. That was it. Not everything about Eleanor Mercer. But the mystery I had actually been carrying? Solved. Who was E. Mercer? Eleanor Mercer.

Why was she moving through those places? Work. Why roads, crossings, mills, camps, residences? Customers. Why Riverside House? Temporary business address and company contact through Talbot. Why multiple mount types? Supply batches and different jobs. Why photographs seemed to form a route? Because travel and commissions

followed accessible transportation corridors. No secret expedition. No lost survey. No hidden mission.

A working photographer. A good one. I looked at six images. For first time, they felt less like clues. They were photographs again. That mattered. I picked up residence. Somebody had wanted their house remembered. Mill. Someone had wanted work documented. Road. Company wanted progress shown. Ferry approach. Same. Camp. Maybe owner. Maybe company. Didn't matter immediately. Eleanor had gone there. Set equipment. Waited. Made photograph. Moved on.

I smiled. Tangle looked at me.

"Happy."

"Yeah."

Then they pointed to papers.

"Fixed."

I laughed.

"Yes."

Tangle nodded.

"Said."

I laughed harder. Fair. Then I stopped.

"Tangle."

They looked up.

"I'm sorry."

They understood that. I pointed at papers. Then myself.

"Bone yelled."

Tangle nodded.

"Bone scared."

I thought.

"Not scared."

Then reconsidered. Maybe. I pointed at papers. Then head.

"Too important."

Tangle thought.

"Obs...?"

They had caught word earlier.

"Obsession."

"Ob-session."

"Yeah."

Tangle looked at papers. Then me.

"Bad?"

"Sometimes."

Blank. I pointed at research. Then mimed narrow vision. Hands like tunnel.

"Bone see one way."

Tangle nodded. Then pointed at themselves.

"Tangle see wrong way."

I smiled.

"Different way."

Tangle considered.

"Different."

"Yes."

Then they pointed at papers.

"Different fix."

"Exactly."

Good. I left papers out until noon. Not to research. To look. Eleanor Mercer. Name changed photographs. Not visually. But somehow. Then I packed them. Not old order. Tangle's. That mattered. We drove. Wayfinder took road west. No archive waiting. No library. No next Mercer clue. Strange. I felt lighter. Tangle sat by window. Blaze slept. Katniss watched road. Echo ate.

After an hour, Tangle said: "Mercer done?" I thought.

"Enough."

Tangle nodded.

"Enough."

Better word than done. There would always be more. Eleanor's later life. Earlier life. Customers. Other photographs. Maybe family. Maybe more collections. But I didn't need all of it. The question had become a person. That was enough. We stopped at an overlook late afternoon. Wide plain. Road below. No dramatic clouds. No strange light. I took camera anyway.

Tangle followed.

"Photo?"

"Maybe."

They groaned. I laughed. I looked. Nothing obvious. Then a small cottonwood stood alone near wash. Most leaves gone. No sunset. No storm. No train. No historic structure. Just tree. I framed. Too centered. Moved. Tangle said nothing. Good. Waited. Nothing changed. Also good. Click. I looked at screen. Simple. Quiet. Keeper. Tangle looked.

"Why?"

I thought.

"Because I like it."

They considered. Then nodded.

"Good."

No deeper reason required. At camp, nobody mentioned Mercer until dinner. Then Tangle pointed at notebook.

"Eleanor."

"Yes."

"Photo."

"Yes."

"Road."

"Some."

"House."

"Some."

"Work."

I looked at them.

"Yeah."

Work. That was probably the best answer of all. After dinner, Echo climbed onto Tangle's staff.

"Very heavy."

Still false. Katniss sat beside Tangle. Closer now. Blaze leaned against both. Tangle braced.

"Very heavy."

That one was true. I laughed. Later, notebook. I wrote final Mercer entry for night: E. Mercer identified as Eleanor Mercer, photographer based in Port Alder in 1891. Commercial traveling work included views, residences, and outdoor commissions. North River Improvement Company commission confirmed through Talbot correspondence and voucher records. Surviving photographs likely represent multiple jobs rather than one unified series.

Then: Tangle solved the organizing problem. I yelled before I looked. I apologized before I knew they were right. Important order. I underlined that. Then photography: Single cottonwood near wash. Ordinary light. Keeper. No Mercer comparison. Mine. I closed notebook. Tangle was already arranging pack. Not papers. Their things. By usefulness. Probably. I looked at them.

"Tangle."

They looked up.

“Thank you.”

No confusion this time.

“Welcome.”

Almost perfect. Lights out. For the first time in a long time, the Mercer envelope stayed closed because I had no question waiting for morning. Wayfinder quiet. Four companions nearby. I did not correct count.

CHAPTER 69

Everybody Leaves a Mark

The back of Wayfinder looked unfinished. Not broken. Not empty. Unfinished. There was a difference. I noticed it while making coffee. The name existed now. Wayfinder. In notebook. In my head. On Ray's phone. In Tangle's vocabulary. Just not on van. Tangle stood behind me.

"Wayfinder."

"Yeah."

They pointed at rear door.

"No Wayfinder."

I looked.

"Technically, Wayfinder is Wayfinder whether it says Wayfinder or not."

Blank. Good. Tangle pointed again.

"Need name."

Of course. Blaze appeared beside us. Katniss sat on step. Echo yelled from inside. Apparently committee had formed. I drank coffee.

"Fine."

Tangle smiled. Dangerous. I did not want vinyl letters. Too clean. Didn't want polished paint. Too new. Wayfinder had earned every faded patch, scratch, rust spot, and stubborn piece of old paint. The name needed to belong there. Not cover it. I pulled Ellen's compass from pocket. Turned it over. WAYFINDER Small. Worn. Simple. Tangle leaned close.

"Same."

"That's the idea."

I photographed engraving with phone. Reference. Then enlarged it. Not perfect lettering. Good. I found paper. Pencil. Straightedge. Tangle immediately sat down.

"Paper."

"Not Mercer."

They visibly relaxed. Good. I sketched letters. W. A. Y. F. I. N. D. E. R. Tangle watched.

"Big."

"Has to be readable."

Blank. I pointed at road. Then rear door. Then farther away.

"See."

Tangle nodded.

"Big."

Exactly. I didn't center it perfectly. Wayfinder wasn't perfect. I measured anyway. Because there were limits. An hour later, I had chalk guidelines across back. Katniss walked through one. Of course.

"Thank you."

Paw print. Tangle looked.

"Kat sign."

I stopped.

"Actually."

That gave me idea. The name alone looked right. But too solitary. Which would have been appropriate once. Not now. I looked at Blaze. Katniss. Echo. Tangle. No. Not solitary. I painted first letter. Weathered cream. Not bright white. W. Slow. The old door made brush skip in places. Perfect. A. Y. Tangle watched every stroke. Echo contributed commentary.

Blaze slept. Katniss tried to sit on paint rag. Normal. By noon: WAYFINDER Across rear door. Not factory. Not professional. Not pretending. Mine. Ours. I stepped back. Tangle did too.

"Good."

"Yeah."

Then Tangle pointed below it.

"More."

I looked.

"No."

Tangle looked at group. Then below name.

"Family."

That landed. I stared at empty space.

"That's going to become a mess."

Tangle nodded. Apparently endorsement. Fine. I found smaller brush. Signed beneath name: Bone Nothing fancy. Tangle watched. Then pointed at Blaze.

"Blaze."

"He's not holding a brush."

Blank. I looked at dog. Blaze looked back. Paw print. Of course. I found shallow tray. Put a little washable, weatherproof marking paint in it. Not much. Pressed one front paw gently. Blaze tolerated this because trust was occasionally unfortunate. Then onto lower rear panel. One large print. Good. I cleaned paw immediately. Tangle watched.

"Blaze sign."

"Yes."

Katniss saw tray. Katniss left. Naturally.

"Your turn."

Nothing.

"Katniss."

Nothing. Tangle crouched.

"Kat."

Katniss stopped. Interesting. Tangle held out empty hand. Katniss approached. Not tray. Tangle. Then stepped directly beside paint. I waited. Katniss sniffed. One paw touched edge. Then ground. Tiny paint print. Accidental. I looked at it. Tangle looked.

"Kat sign."

Technically. I pressed a scrap of paper lightly to painted ground print. Then transferred that print beneath Blaze's. Not perfect. Better. Katniss had participated without consent to procedure. Correct. Next: Echo. This was harder. Tiny feet. Bird-safe washable paint only. Minimal contact. No nonsense. I put a tiny amount on smooth pad. Echo stepped onto my hand. Harness unnecessary. We were at van.

I touched one foot lightly to pad. Then to rear panel. Small three-toed mark. Echo immediately tried to bite brush.

"Tradition complete."

Tangle laughed. Clean foot. Done. Three marks. Blaze. Katniss. Echo. Then Tangle. They stared at remaining space. I handed over brush. Tangle did not take it immediately.

"Name?"

"Your choice."

Too many words. I pointed at brush. Then panel.

"Tangle sign."

They understood. Tangle took brush. Held it wrong. Then adjusted. Wrote slowly. T. Pause. A. N. G. L. E. Letters uneven. Spacing worse. One angle strange. Perfect. Then Tangle stopped. Looked at name. Looked at

me. Then added small spiral beside it. Simple. Not symbol I knew. Not explanation. Just Tangle. I nodded.

"Good."

Tangle smiled.

"Family."

I looked at back of Wayfinder. Name above. Bone beneath. Large paw. Small paw. Tiny bird foot. Tangle. Spiral.

"Yeah."

No ceremony. No declaration. Just paint drying. That was better. I took camera. Not phone. This one deserved camera. I stepped back. First frame too tight. Moved farther. Wayfinder rear filled most of frame. Road behind. Open sky. Name readable. Marks visible. Click. Keeper. Then another closer reference frame of signatures. Also worth keeping. Two actual photographs. Good.

Tangle watched.

"Photo remember."

"Exactly."

They nodded.

"Family remember."

I looked at camera screen.

"Yeah."

We waited for paint to dry. No road. No research. No Mercer. Nothing needed solving. Good. Afternoon passed slowly. Blaze slept in shade. Katniss climbed roof. Echo watched from enclosure. Tangle collected two washers and one bottle cap from ground near campsite.

"Useful."

"Naturally."

When paint finally set, I packed supplies. Tangle touched rear door near—not on—their name.

"Mine."

I looked.

"Your mark."

They nodded. Then touched Wayfinder lettering.

"Home."

I almost said maybe. Didn't.

"Yeah."

Home. We drove before sunset. First time I saw Wayfinder's new name reflected faintly in a store window as we passed. That felt strange. Good strange. At fuel stop, one man looked at rear.

"Wayfinder?"

"Yeah."

"Good name."

"Wasn't mine originally."

He nodded like that made sense. Maybe it did. Back on road, Tangle pointed through rear window.

"People see."

"Yes."

"Know."

I looked ahead.

"Maybe."

Tangle sighed. I laughed.

"Fine. Know."

They smiled. We camped late. No elaborate dinner. Simple. After dark, I opened notebook. Painted WAYFINDER on rear door using Ellen's compass engraving as lettering reference. Then: Bone signed. Blaze paw print. Katniss paw print. Echo foot mark. Tangle wrote name and added small spiral. I stopped. Then added: No one voted. Probably better.

Photography: Wayfinder rear / name and marks / road behind. Keeper. Closer reference frame of signatures and prints. Good. I closed notebook. Tangle sat at table. Not floor. Not edge. At table. Blaze beneath. Katniss beside. Echo quiet. I looked around. Five. This time I didn't correct myself. Tangle noticed me looking.

"Bone."

"Yeah?"

"Family."

I nodded.

"Yeah."

No maybe. Not anymore.

CHAPTER 70

A Camera for Different Eyes

The next town had one traffic light. It was red. This felt excessive. Wayfinder stopped anyway. Tangle watched signal.

"Why?"

"Because red means stop."

Tangle looked at empty intersection. Then at me.

"Nothing."

"Still stop."

Tangle frowned.

"Why?"

"Society."

Blank.

"Rules."

Tangle nodded.

"Rules when nothing."

"Especially then."

That seemed to make less sense. Fair. Green. We moved. The town was small enough that Wayfinder attracted attention without actually being unusual. Old camper. Faded paint. Rust. WAYFINDER across rear. Five marks beneath it. Good. We needed groceries. Laundry eventually. Fuel. Probably coffee. Nothing historic. Nothing Mercer. I liked town already. Tangle rode beside window. They pointed.

"Dog."

Dog in pickup.

"Yes."

"Dog high."

"Also yes."

Then: "Blaze high?" I looked at Blaze.

"No."

Blaze remained asleep. Good. We parked near main street. Brick storefronts. Secondhand shop. Cafe. Hardware. Pawn shop. Barber. Tangle read none of signs. Yet. But they recognized objects through windows.

"Tools."

Hardware.

"Food."

Cafe. Then secondhand store. Tangle stared.

"Many useful."

Dangerous.

"We're not buying all of it."

Blank. I pointed at store. Then Wayfinder. Then shook head.

"Too many."

Tangle nodded solemnly.

"Wayfinder full."

"Exactly."

Blaze came with me. Katniss stayed in Wayfinder by choice. Echo stayed comfortable inside. Tangle stepped onto sidewalk. They had gotten better around towns. Still watched people. Still preferred edge. But not hiding. A woman passing with grocery bag looked at Tangle. Tangle said: "Morning." She hesitated. Then: "Morning." Tangle looked pleased. Good. Secondhand shop smelled like old wood, dust, and somebody else's decisions.

Shelves everywhere. Tools. Books. Lamps. Kitchen things. Records. Cameras. I stopped. Tangle stopped because I did. Glass case near counter. Three old film cameras. Two digital compacts. One instant camera missing door. I crouched. Tangle leaned over shoulder.

"Camera."

"Yeah."

One compact looked promising. Older Canon. Nothing fancy. Black body. Scratched corner. Clean lens. Optical zoom. Simple controls. Small enough for Tangle's hands. I asked clerk to see it. He unlocked case.

"Still works."

"Battery?"

"Charged enough."

Good. I turned it over. Battery door latched. Buttons worked. Lens extended. Screen came on. Tangle watched. Very closely. I pointed camera toward shelf. Half press. Focus. Click. Image appeared. Not art. Proof. Good. Tangle's eyes moved from camera to screen. Then shelf. Then

screen again. Same thing they had done when I showed photographs before. Interesting. I looked at camera.

Tangle had been watching me take photographs for weeks now. Asking why. Watching light. Finding compositions before I did sometimes. I turned camera over once more. Tangle seemed interested in photography. Maybe Tangle would like a camera of their own. I checked price. Reasonable. That was unfortunate. The clerk saw expression.

"Comes with charger."

Worse.

"Memory card?"

"Small one."

Of course. I looked at Tangle. They were staring at an old brass hinge in bin. Not camera anymore. Good. I bought it. Tangle did not notice until clerk put small camera bag on counter. Then: "Bone camera?"

"No."

They looked at me. I held bag out.

"Tangle."

Silence. Actually silence. That was rare. Tangle pointed at self.

"Tangle?"

"Yes."

Then camera.

"Mine?"

"Yours."

That word they knew. Tangle took bag slowly. Not like found object. Not like washer. Careful. They opened zipper. Camera inside. Tangle stared. Then at me.

"Why?"

Good question. I pointed at camera. Then Tangle.

"You like photo."

Tangle nodded.

"Now Tangle photo."

They looked back at camera. Then: "Tangle photo."

"Exactly."

Tangle touched lens. I immediately said: "Not there." They froze. I softened.

"Finger bad."

Tangle looked at lens. Then finger.

"Dirty."

"Yes."

They wiped fingertip on fur. Not helping. I laughed.

"We'll work on that."

Blank. Fine. The clerk watched us.

"First camera?"

"For Tangle."

Tangle looked at clerk.

"Mine."

The clerk smiled.

"That's a good one to learn on."

Tangle nodded as if this mattered. Maybe it did. Outside, Tangle stopped after three steps. Opened bag. Pulled camera out. Held backward.

"Other way."

They turned it. Upside down.

"Closer."

Tangle looked at me. I took camera gently.

"Lens."

Pointed.

"Looks."

Then back screen.

"You look."

Tangle nodded. I handed it back. This time correct. Good.

"Button?"

I pointed shutter.

"Picture."

Tangle pressed. Nothing. Camera off.

"First lesson."

I pointed power.

"On."

Tangle pressed. Lens extended. They jumped slightly. Then laughed. Good. Now shutter. Tangle pointed camera directly at pavement. Click. First Tangle photograph. Gray sidewalk. One shoe. Piece of gum. Half my shadow. They reviewed it. Stared. I stared.

"Well."

Tangle looked pleased.

"Photo."

“Technically.”

No understanding. Probably better. We walked. Tangle took another. Fire hydrant. Then window reflection. Then Blaze’s back. Then their own finger partly covering lens.

“Finger.”

They looked.

“Bad.”

“Yes.”

Deleted? No. I almost showed them. Then stopped. Their camera. Their decision. Good. At cafe patio we ate lunch. Tangle set camera beside plate. Too close. I moved it.

“Food there. Camera here.”

Tangle nodded.

“Paper there.”

They remembered. Good. Tangle photographed sandwich. Then pickle. Then looked at image.

“Bad.”

“That’s not camera’s fault.”

Blank. They grinned. Good. A kid at nearby table noticed camera.

“What are you taking pictures of?”

Tangle looked at me. I didn’t answer. Tangle thought.

“Things.”

Kid nodded.

“Cool.”

That was easiest social interaction Tangle had ever had. Good. Kid went back to fries. Tangle took picture of ketchup bottle. Maybe less good. After lunch: groceries. Tangle photographed shopping cart. Wheel. Specifically wheel. Not whole cart. Interesting. Then fruit display. Not fruit. Price tags. Then stack of canned food. Not cans. The repeating metal rims. I noticed pattern.

Did not comment. Good. Back at Wayfinder, Tangle showed me camera.

“Many.”

Twenty-three photographs. Already.

“Yes.”

They scrolled. Sidewalk. Hydrant. Reflection. Blaze. Finger. Sandwich. Pickle. Ketchup. Cart wheel. Price tags. Can rims. Old brick wall. A drain grate. Shadow under bench. Echo through window. Katniss’s

tail. Wayfinder lettering reflected backward in store glass. I stopped. That one. Wayfinder reflected. Only part. Letters reversed. Tangle's own shadow stretched across reflection. Interesting. I would not have taken it.

Tangle looked at me.

"Bad?"

"No."

I pointed.

"Different."

They frowned. I took my camera from bag. Pointed at mine.

"Bone photo."

Then their camera.

"Tangle photo."

Then moved hands apart.

"Different."

Tangle thought. Then smiled.

"Good."

"Yes."

Very. We stayed in town longer than planned. Laundry. Fuel. Hardware. Tangle photographed laundromat drum turning through glass. Not clothes. The circle. Then hardware bins. Again not tools. Shapes. Hooks beside washers beside screws. At pawn shop window, Tangle photographed reflection of Blaze lying under bench while old guitars hung behind glass. That was actually good. I said nothing.

Important. By late afternoon, camera battery dropped. Tangle frowned.

"Broken?"

"No."

I pointed battery symbol.

"Needs charge."

"Food?"

I laughed.

"Camera food."

Tangle nodded.

"Electric."

"Yes."

They had learned that one from Wayfinder. Back inside, charger plugged. Tangle watched icon. Then: "Later."

“Exactly.”

We left town. No hurry. Tangle sat by window without camera. Hands empty. That seemed unusual now. After twenty miles, they said: “Photo tomorrow.”

“Yes.”

Then: “Bone teach.” I looked over.

“Some.”

Tangle waited. I pointed at imaginary camera.

“How hold. Button. Focus. Zoom.”

Then pointed at Tangle’s eyes.

“What see?”

Pointed at Tangle.

“Tangle.”

They thought.

“Tangle see.”

“Yes.”

Then my eyes.

“Bone see.”

“Yes.”

“Different.”

“Exactly.”

Tangle nodded. Good. No composition doctrine. No rules beyond basics. Tomorrow could be simple. Maybe roadside stop. Maybe open country. Maybe nothing special. Good. Late light came through clouds. I considered stopping. Didn’t. Tangle had no charged camera. I had mine. Still didn’t. Not every evening needed keeper. That also felt healthy. At camp, Tangle checked battery every four minutes.

“Still.”

“Yes.”

Four minutes later.

“Still.”

“Yes.”

Again.

“Tangle.”

They looked.

“Wait.”

Tangle sighed.

"Bone wait many."

"Exactly."

That ended argument. Dinner. Katniss sat beside Tangle. Blaze underneath. Echo watched charger cable. Tangle pointed at Echo.

"No."

I smiled. Good. After dark, battery full. Tangle immediately turned camera on. I stopped them.

"Tomorrow."

They looked offended.

"Dark."

Tangle pointed at lantern.

"Light."

Fair. I shrugged.

"Try."

Tangle took photograph. Lantern on table. Then another. Not lantern. Light falling across Blaze's paws beneath table. I looked at screen. Warm light. Dark floor. One huge paw. Tangle's little hand at edge reaching for dropped washer. Interesting. Again, not mine. Tangle looked.

"Good?"

I thought. Then shook head. Not no. I pointed at them.

"Tangle decide."

They stared.

"Tangle decide good?"

"Yes."

Long pause. Tangle looked at photograph. Then: "Good." I smiled.

"Then good."

That mattered. Notebook before bed. Not Mercer. That section could rest. I wrote: Found used digital compact in town. Bought it for Tangle. Then: Teaching should stay basic: operation, handling, focus, zoom, awareness of whole frame. Do not teach Tangle to make Bone photographs. I paused. That sounded like instruction to myself. Good. Then: First photographs already different. Tangle notices relationships, repetitions, reflections, small functional details.

Then: Tangle decides which Tangle photographs are good. Underlined. No Bone keeper today. Interesting. I almost felt like I should take one just because the day was ending. No. The road had enough photographs. Tangle's camera sat in bag beside their pack. New thing. Not found. Not repaired. Not borrowed. Theirs. Lights out. Tangle spoke from below.

“Bone.”
“Yeah?”
“Thank.”
“You’re welcome.”
Pause.
“Tangle photo tomorrow.”
I smiled.
“Yeah.”
Tomorrow.

CHAPTER 71

Different Eyes

Tangle was awake before me. This had become less unusual. Camera in hand. That was new. They sat at table looking through photographs from yesterday. Not taking new ones. Reviewing. Good. I made coffee. Tangle looked at mug.

“Bad.”

“You’ve never had coffee.”

“Still bad.”

Fair. Blaze stretched beneath table. Katniss moved from one warm spot to another. Echo made morning noise. Wayfinder quiet. Normal. I pointed at camera.

“Today?”

Tangle nodded.

“Bone teach.”

“Little.”

Important distinction. We drove until road left town behind. Nothing dramatic. Low hills. Dry grass. Fence lines. Clouds that couldn’t decide whether they mattered. I found a pullout beside old county road. Stopped. Tangle was out before Blaze. That was impressive. They held camera wrong. Less impressive.

“Hands.”

Tangle looked. I adjusted grip.

“One here.”

Right hand.

“One under.”

Left. Tangle copied. Better.

“Don’t squeeze.”

Blank. I mimed crushing camera. Tangle recoiled.

“Bad.”

“Very.”

They loosened grip. Good. Next.

“Lens.”

Pointed.

“Nothing in front.”

Tangle checked fingers. Clear.

“Good.”

Then shutter.

“Half.”

Tangle pressed full. Click. Photograph of my ribs. We both looked at screen.

“Half.”

I demonstrated. Half press. Focus box.

“Wait.”

Then full press. Click. Tangle tried. Focused on Blaze. Click. Blaze’s nose. Only nose. Tangle smiled.

“Blaze.”

“Part of Blaze.”

They looked.

“Big.”

“Yes.”

Blaze sneezed. Good critique. I showed zoom.

“In.”

Tangle zoomed in.

“Out.”

Out. Then too far in. Then too far out. Then in again. Tangle liked zoom. Dangerous.

“Feet better.”

Blank. I pointed toward old fence post.

“Want closer?”

Nod. I walked forward.

“Feet.”

Tangle followed.

“Sometimes walk.”

They looked at zoom button. Then feet.

“Both.”

“Exactly.”

We spent twenty minutes doing almost nothing. Good. Power. Focus. Zoom. Review. Delete. Delete caused problem. Tangle took blurry photograph of ground. I showed trash icon.

“Delete.”

Tangle stared.

“Why?”

“Bad picture.”

Tangle looked offended. Fair point. I corrected.

“Picture you don’t want.”

Better. Tangle kept blurry ground. Their camera. Good. We walked farther from Wayfinder. Blaze on leash until clear. Katniss in harness with long line. Echo with flight harness. Tangle free with staff and camera. Five travelers. Still strange. Normal strange. Tangle stopped. Camera up. I looked where they looked. Nothing. Dry ditch. Broken fence. Plastic bottle caught under wire.

Click. They reviewed. I leaned slightly. Tangle turned screen toward me. Bottle wasn’t center. Fence wasn’t center. Shadow from wire crossed ditch. Bottle sat exactly where shadow changed direction. Interesting.

“Good?”

“Tangle decide.”

They looked again.

“Good.”

“Then good.”

We continued. Tangle photographed Blaze walking. Then Katniss under grass. Then Echo on branch. Then me. Click. I stopped. Tangle lowered camera.

“Bone.”

“Yeah.”

I pointed at camera. Then at myself.

“People.”

Tangle waited.

“Ask first.”

Blank. I simplified.

“Person picture?”

Pointed at imaginary stranger. Then camera.

“Ask.”

I held hand up.

“Okay?”

Tangle nodded.

“Permission.”

They tried word.

“Per... mission.”

“Yes.”

Then I pointed at Blaze.

“Dog?”

Tangle considered.

“Ask Blaze?”

I looked at Blaze. Blaze was licking dirt.

“No.”

Tangle laughed. Good. I pointed back at myself.

“Bone picture?”

Tangle understood.

“Ask Bone.”

“Yes.”

Tangle raised camera.

“Bone?”

“What?”

“Picture?”

I smiled.

“Yeah.”

Click. Too fast. Probably terrible. Tangle checked. I didn’t. Their camera. We walked. An old roadside stand appeared ahead. Closed. Maybe permanently. Hand-painted sign. Bench. Tin roof. Two empty coolers. Tangle froze.

“Things.”

“Many.”

They moved around stand. Not random. Looking. Camera up. Down. Two steps left. One back. Interesting. Click. Then another. Then Tangle crouched. All fours briefly. Camera low. Click. I stayed out of way. Eventually they showed me. First: old bench. Empty road behind. Good. Second: rusted bottle opener screwed to post. Road reflected in tiny curved metal. Better.

Third: underside of bench. Dropped coin. Old gum. Shadow. Blaze’s paws just entering frame. I laughed. Tangle frowned.

“Bad?”

"No."

I pointed.

"Didn't see."

Tangle looked pleased. Exactly. That was difference. I saw places. Tangle saw connections inside them. Not always prettier. Often stranger. Sometimes better. We kept going. Around noon we reached picnic area near shallow river. Three tables. One family at far end. Two fishermen. One old man feeding crumbs to birds. Tangle looked at camera. Then people. Then me.

Good.

"Ask."

"Yes."

Tangle did not take picture. Better. We chose empty table. The old man noticed Echo.

"Pretty bird."

Echo screamed. Man laughed.

"Opinionated too."

"Very."

Tangle watched. Camera stayed down. Good. After a while, fisherman nearest us held up trout. His friend took phone picture. Tangle watched. Then looked at me. I knew question.

"You can ask."

Tangle stood. Walked over slowly.

"Picture?"

Fisherman looked confused. Tangle pointed at camera. Then fish.

"Picture?"

"Oh."

He grinned.

"Sure."

Tangle took one. Then another. Fisherman looked at screen.

"Huh."

That was not promising. Then: "That's actually kind of neat." Now I was curious. Tangle returned. Showed me. Fish was not center. Hands were. Wet scales. Weathered fingers. River behind. Good photograph. Very Tangle.

"You asked."

"Permission."

"Yep."

Tangle smiled.

“Good.”

“Very.”

Later, family left. Bench empty. Tangle photographed cups they left behind. Not people. Good. I took my camera out. First time all day. Tangle noticed.

“Bone photo.”

“Maybe.”

I looked toward river. Nothing. Then sunlight broke through. Brief. Across water. Old cottonwoods on opposite bank. Not dramatic. Just enough. I waited. Tangle watched me. Did not take same picture. Important. Instead they turned around. Click. I looked.

“What?”

Tangle showed screen. My shadow. Camera raised. Echo perched on branch above. Katniss’s line crossing foreground. Blaze lying under table. Wayfinder distant beyond. Not what I saw. Not even close. Good. I took my photograph. River. Cottonwoods. Brief light. Keeper. Tangle took theirs. Also keeper. If they said so. We walked back toward Wayfinder. Tangle stopped at road sign.

Old bolts. Faded paint. Sticker half torn away. Click. Then ditch culvert. Click. Then three stones lined by runoff. Click. I didn’t ask why. That felt like progress. Back at van, we reviewed photos. Not as lesson. Just looking. Tangle deleted none. Of course. I deleted two of mine. Tangle looked horrified.

“No.”

“My camera.”

Tangle stared. Then: “Bone decide.”

“Exactly.”

They learned fast. At dinner, Tangle set camera beside plate. Farther away this time. Good.

“Tomorrow photo?”

“Probably.”

Tangle frowned.

“Probably.”

I had created problem.

“Yes. Tomorrow photo.”

Better. Notebook after dark. Tangle understands basic operation now. Then: Important: ask permission before photographing people. Tangle understood quickly. Then: Do not teach eye. Only camera. I paused.

Added: Tangle sees differently. Leave it alone. Photography: Bone — Keeper: shallow river, cottonwoods on opposite bank, brief light breaking through.

Then: Tangle — Keeper: Bone's shadow with camera raised; Echo above; Katniss line crossing foreground; Blaze under table; Wayfinder distant. I looked at that line. Five things. No posed group. No one looking at camera. Still us. Good. I closed notebook. Tangle was reviewing photographs again.

"Bone."

"Yeah?"

They turned screen toward me. Photograph from earlier. Me walking ahead. Not looking back. Blaze beside me. Nothing special. Tangle pointed.

"Bone photo."

"Yeah."

Then tapped own chest.

"Tangle photo."

"Yeah."

They smiled.

"Different."

I nodded.

"Exactly."

CHAPTER 72

What We Keep

Morning came without an argument. Suspicious. Blaze ate breakfast. Katniss inspected breakfast. Echo announced breakfast. Tangle photographed breakfast. Click. I looked over.

“Bowl?”

Tangle checked screen.

“Blaze waiting.”

I looked again. Blaze wasn’t in frame. Only shadow. Of course. I drank coffee. Tangle looked at mug.

“Still bad.”

“Good morning to you too.”

We left camp before heat built. No destination. That was familiar. Wayfinder rolled through open country. Low hills. Long fences. Occasional cottonwoods where water probably existed whether road admitted it or not. Tangle kept camera in lap. Not photographing everything now. That was improvement. Maybe. They watched. Sometimes camera came up. Sometimes not. Better. At one point they raised it toward passing pickup.

Then lowered it. Driver visible.

“Ask.”

“Exactly.”

Tangle nodded. Good. Ten miles later they photographed abandoned mailbox. No permission required. Mailbox did not object. Around midmorning, I pulled into roadside overlook. Nothing famous. No monument. No visitor center. Just gravel and view. Valley below. Road curling through it. Power lines crossing farther out. Wayfinder ticking as engine cooled.

Blaze jumped down. Katniss followed in harness. Echo came out on mine. Tangle took camera. We walked. Tangle stopped before I did.

“Road for eyes.”

“Leading line.”

Blank.

"Road for eyes."

I sighed.

"Yes."

Better term. I framed road below. Tangle did not. Good. Mine: road entering lower corner. Fence running parallel. Cloud shadow moving across distant ridge. Wait. Light moved. Wait. Tangle watched.

"Bone wait many."

"Photography."

"Bone wait many."

"Also true."

Light reached bend in road. Click. Keeper. Tangle had wandered thirty feet away. I watched. They crouched beside guardrail. Camera almost at ground level. Click. Then stood. Moved two steps. Click. Looked at screen. Then shook head. Deleted one. I noticed. Said nothing. Progress. Eventually Tangle came back.

"See."

Their photograph showed bolt at base of guardrail. Small rust trail beneath it. Beyond, completely out of focus, road curved through valley. I stared.

"Tangle keeper?"

They thought.

"No."

Scrolled. Second frame. Guardrail shadow fell across gravel. Katniss's line crossed shadow. Farther out, Blaze stood looking into valley. Wayfinder reflected faintly in metal rail.

"Tangle keeper."

"Yeah."

Definitely. Different eyes. We kept moving. Around noon we reached tiny park near old bridge. Picnic tables. Restroom that had survived several governments. Two cottonwoods. One vending machine. The bridge crossed narrow river. Modern concrete now. Older stone abutment still visible beside it. I almost reached for notebook. Stopped. No Mercer. Good. Tangle noticed old stone anyway.

"Old."

"Yep."

"New."

Pointed at bridge.

"Yep."

They photographed both. Not because mystery. Because there. That felt healthier. We ate lunch. Tangle put camera safely away from food. Without reminder. Excellent. Katniss occupied bench. Blaze lay underneath. Echo sat on low branch in harness. Tangle looked at all three. Then at me.

“Picture?”

“They’re not people.”

Tangle pointed at Echo.

“Person?”

I considered.

“Complicated.”

Blank.

“Ask if unsure.”

Tangle looked toward Echo.

“Echo. Picture?”

Echo screamed. Tangle nodded.

“Yes.”

I laughed. Fair. Click. Echo turned sideways. Tangle took another. Then Blaze. Then Katniss. Katniss left.

“Kat say no.”

“Probably.”

Tangle lowered camera. Good enough. After lunch I finally remembered something I had meant to do. Wayfinder photo. Rear door. Name. Marks. I had taken it after paint dried. Had not sent Ray yet. I found phone. Tangle leaned over.

“Ray.”

“Yeah.”

I attached photo. Typed: Finally put the name on it. Then another: Everybody signed. Tangle pointed at own mark on screen.

“Tangle.”

“That’s you.”

Send. No speech. Phone went back pocket. We walked bridge. Blaze beside me. Katniss long line behind. Echo on forearm. Tangle moved ahead. Camera up. Down. Up again. A cyclist approached. Tangle lowered camera before cyclist passed. Good. The cyclist smiled at Blaze.

“Big dog.”

“Very.”

Blaze wagged. Tangle waited until cyclist gone. Then took photograph of tire track left in dusty shoulder. Of course. At river midpoint, I stopped. Water below. Bridge shadow. Cottonwood leaves turning. Tangle stopped too. I expected them to photograph water. They photographed my hand on railing. Then Echo's feet on wrist. Then old scratch marks in rail.

"What are you doing?"

"Hands."

I looked.

"Why?"

Tangle searched for words.

"Hold."

Then pointed: hand. railing. Echo feet.

"Hold."

I understood enough. Things holding things. Of course.

"Good."

Tangle nodded. Maybe. Phone buzzed. Ray. I opened message. Well I'll be damned. Then: Ellen would've liked that. Then: Tell whoever drew the spiral they have better handwriting than you. I laughed. Tangle looked.

"What?"

I turned phone. Pointed at spiral.

"Ray likes."

Tangle stared.

"Ray know Tangle?"

"Ray knows your mark."

Not same thing. Maybe enough. Tangle thought. Then: "Ray family?" That question had become easier.

"Yeah."

Tangle nodded.

"Far family."

"Exactly."

I texted Ray: Tangle says you're far family. Three dots. Then: I've been called worse. I laughed again. Tangle waited.

"Ray says yes."

Good enough. We spent afternoon following road along river. Nothing happened. Which was nice. I stopped twice for photographs. First was nothing. Light wrong. Didn't take it. Second: an old cottonwood

leaning over narrow side channel. Roots exposed. Water catching one bright patch. Click. Keeper. Tangle stood behind me. Did not copy. Instead photographed roots. Close.

Dirt packed between them. Bottle cap caught in one gap. Tiny green plant growing beside it. Tangle showed me.

“Useful?”

“Photo or bottle cap?”

Tangle looked at bottle cap. Then photo.

“Both.”

Naturally. They left bottle cap. That surprised me.

“Not taking?”

Tangle shook head.

“Belong photo.”

I liked that. We drove another hour. Stopped beside open field before evening. Wind moved dry grass. Wayfinder faced west. No dramatic sunset. Just softer light. Blaze wandered within leash range. Katniss watched insects. Echo preened. Tangle sat on bumper reviewing photographs. I sat beside them.

“Show me.”

Tangle scrolled. Breakfast shadow. Mailbox. Guardrail. Katniss line. Bridge stone. Echo. Bike track. My hand. Echo feet. Roots. Bottle cap. Then one I hadn’t seen. Wayfinder from far behind. Not whole van. Rear corner. Name visible only partly. Bone— my shadow— stretching across road toward van. Blaze halfway between. Katniss near wheel. Echo tiny color at open door.

Tangle’s own shadow at bottom edge with camera raised. I stared.

“When?”

Tangle pointed back toward bridge. I hadn’t noticed. Good.

“Tangle keeper?”

They looked. Long time. Then nodded.

“Keeper.”

“Yeah.”

I would have kept it too. But not because it looked like one of mine. Because it didn’t. Dinner was simple. No arguments. Almost. Tangle put pickle on edge of plate.

“Bad.”

“You chose it.”

“Check.”

"And?"

"Still bad."

Scientific method. After dark, notebook. I wrote: Ray saw Wayfinder name. Says Ellen would've liked it. Then: Tangle called Ray far family. Pause. That one stayed. Photography: Bone — Keeper: road curving through valley, fence line, cloud shadow on ridge.

Tangle — Keeper: guardrail shadow across gravel, Katniss's line crossing it, Blaze looking over valley, Wayfinder reflected faintly in rail. Bone — Keeper: cottonwood roots over side channel, one patch of light on water. Tangle — Keeper: Wayfinder from behind, partial name, Bone's shadow reaching toward van, Blaze between, Katniss near wheel, Echo at doorway, Tangle's own shadow with camera at frame edge.

Four photographs. Two mine. Two theirs. None alike. Good. I closed notebook. Tangle was still looking at camera.

"Bone."

"Yeah?"

"Same road."

"Yeah."

Tangle held up camera.

"Different."

I nodded.

"That's the point."

They smiled. Wayfinder quiet behind us. Name on back. Marks underneath. Road ahead somewhere. No mystery waiting. Just tomorrow.

CHAPTER 73

No Reason to Hurry

We passed the turnoff. I noticed three miles later. This used to bother me. Not because I was lost. Because I had intended to go that way. Apparently intention and reality had negotiated without me. I looked at next place wide enough to turn Wayfinder around. Then kept driving. Tangle noticed.

"Wrong?"

"Technically."

They waited. I looked at road ahead.

"Doesn't matter."

Tangle considered that.

"Wrong road good?"

"Sometimes."

Blank.

"Sometimes wrong road is just another road."

Tangle nodded.

"Different."

"Exactly."

Blaze slept through philosophy. Katniss occupied passenger-side sunlight. Echo worked on dismantling something he was not supposed to dismantle. Normal. We drove another twenty miles. No destination worth defending. Good. The road narrowed. Pines replaced open grass. Then opened again into high country. Nothing dramatic. Nothing requiring research. Nothing connected to anyone dead in 1891. Excellent. I stopped at small pullout beside trailhead.

One sign. One map. One trash can. Three vehicles. Tangle took camera.

"Walk?"

"Walk."

Blaze woke instantly. Of course. Katniss stretched like she had been working all morning. Echo came out in harness. We started up trail. Not far. No summit goal. No mileage goal. Just moving. Tangle walked ahead with staff in one hand, camera bag across body. They had figured out bag. Camera out when needed. Camera away when climbing.

Good. First photograph happened ten minutes in. Tangle stopped beside fallen log. Click. I looked. Mushrooms. Small. Pale. Growing from split bark.

"Good?"

"Tangle decide."

They rolled eyes. That was new. I laughed.

"All right. Show me."

They turned screen. Not mushrooms. Three things. Mushrooms growing from dead wood. Green shoot growing beside them. Old boot print crossing mud behind. Dead. Growing. Passing through. I looked longer.

"Keeper?"

Tangle nodded.

"Keeper."

"Yeah."

Definitely. We continued. I had camera with me. Didn't take it out. For almost an hour. That felt strange. Not bad. Just strange. Before Blaze, I had photographed partly because nobody else was there to notice anything with me. That wasn't loneliness. Important distinction. I liked being alone. Still did.

I liked the quiet. Liked choosing direction without explaining it. Liked hearing wind without somebody asking what wind meant. Tangle turned around.

"Bone slow."

"I was thinking."

"Slow thinking."

"Apparently."

They waited. Not impatient. Just waiting. Then we kept going. That was different too. The trail reached small meadow. No spectacular view. A creek crossed it. Grass bent around water. Old fence disappeared into trees. Blaze went immediately toward creek.

"Easy."

He slowed. Mostly. Katniss investigated rocks. Echo moved from my shoulder to low branch. Tangle stood still. Very still. Camera came up. I watched. They weren't aiming at creek. Not fence. Not animals. Me. I pointed at myself.

"Permission?"

Tangle lowered camera.

"Bone picture?"

I smiled.

"Yeah."

Camera up again. I went back to what I was doing. Which was nothing. Good. Click. Tangle moved. Click. Then stopped. I didn't ask to see. Their camera. Their eye. I finally took mine out. Creek had curve. Fence entered from left. Blaze stood knee-deep in water. Too much. I waited. Blaze moved out. Better. Katniss crossed foreground.

Worse. Echo flew short tethered hop from branch to branch. Now everything moved. I lowered camera. Tangle watched.

"No?"

"No."

"Why?"

I looked again.

"Too much."

Tangle looked around. Blaze. Katniss. Echo. Creek. Fence. Trees. Then me.

"Family."

"That's exactly the problem."

Tangle frowned. I tried again.

"Photo can't hold everything."

They looked at camera. Then meadow.

"Why?"

Good question.

"Sometimes it can."

I raised mine. Then lowered it again.

"Sometimes if you put everything in, nothing matters."

Tangle thought. Then lifted their camera. Click.

"Everything."

I sighed.

"Of course."

They showed me. They had photographed reflection in creek. Blaze's legs. Katniss's silhouette on bank. Echo's color reflected near branch. My bones and hat broken by ripples. Tangle's shadow crossing all of it. Everything. And somehow something mattered. I stared. Tangle smiled.

"Everything."

"You're annoying."

They did not know word. Probably fortunate. I pointed at picture.

"Good."

Very good. We stayed there. No reason to hurry. Lunch on flat rock. Blaze dried poorly. Katniss found sun. Echo tried to investigate my sandwich. Tangle photographed wrapper folded into triangle. I did not ask. Eventually another hiker came down trail. Older woman. Small backpack. Walking poles. She slowed when she saw us. Most people did. Especially because of me.

Skeleton tends to complicate first impressions.

"Afternoon."

"Afternoon."

She looked at Blaze.

"That's a lot of dog."

"Yes."

Blaze wagged. Then she noticed Echo.

"That's a lot of bird."

Echo screamed.

"Also yes."

Then Tangle. Longer pause. Tangle said: "Morning." I looked at sun.

"Close enough."

Woman laughed. Tangle relaxed. She asked where we were headed. I looked at trail.

"Back to van eventually."

"No, I mean after that."

I thought. Didn't have answer.

"Somewhere else."

She nodded like that made perfect sense. Maybe it did. Tangle lifted camera slightly. Then stopped.

"Picture?"

Woman looked at them.

"Of me?"

Tangle nodded. She smiled.

"Sure."

Tangle took one. Just one. Good restraint. She asked to see. Tangle showed screen. Woman went quiet. Then smiled differently.

"Well."

I leaned over. She stood at edge of meadow. Not centered. Walking poles crossed behind her. Trail curved away. One boot muddy. Sun caught silver hair. Not portrait I would have taken. Better because of that.

"I look like I actually went somewhere."

Tangle looked confused.

"You did."

She laughed.

"Fair enough."

She asked if Tangle could send it. Problem. Tangle looked at me. We had not covered that.

"Camera doesn't send."

I looked at woman.

"I can photograph screen with phone and text it if you want."

She gave number. I did. Tangle watched process.

"Photo go."

"Photo go."

They liked that. Woman continued down trail. After twenty yards she turned.

"Keep taking pictures."

Tangle waved. Then looked at me.

"People like."

"Sometimes."

"Sometimes no."

"Exactly."

Permission. Good. On way back, I finally found photograph. Not landscape. Wayfinder visible through trees at end of trail. Just part of roof. Faded paint. Road beyond. Trail led toward it. Blaze ahead. Katniss behind him. Tangle farther right. Echo on my shoulder, therefore not visible. I stopped. Waited until Tangle moved out. Then stopped myself. Why? I had automatically been trying to simplify frame.

Remove people. Remove animals. Find clean line. Habit. I raised camera before Tangle moved. Blaze. Katniss. Tangle. Wayfinder. Click. Keeper. Tangle heard shutter. Turned.

"Everything?"

"Almost."

They pointed at shoulder. Echo.

“Almost.”

Good enough. Back at Wayfinder, we sat outside awhile. Tangle reviewed images. I reviewed mine. One keeper. Enough. Phone buzzed. Margaret. A picture. Old photograph of Diane with Echo perched on shoulder. Younger Echo. Same expression. Message: Found this in a box today. Thought you should have it. I looked at Echo. He was chewing wooden toy. Same bird. Different life.

I sent back: Thank you. He’s doing well. Loudly. Three dots. That sounds like him. I showed Tangle.

“Diane.”

They remembered.

“Echo family.”

“Yeah.”

“Far?”

I thought.

“No.”

Tangle waited. I pointed at photograph. Then Echo.

“Still family.”

Tangle looked at screen. Then nodded.

“Still.”

That word stayed with me. Later, sunset happened badly. Clouds swallowed most color. Wind came up. Nothing worth waiting for. I made dinner. Tangle took no pictures. Also progress. Afterward, they sat beside me. Camera between us.

“Bone.”

“Yeah?”

“Photo.”

They showed meadow reflection. Everything in it. Broken by water. Still recognizable.

“Good?”

I almost gave usual answer. Tangle decide. Didn’t.

“Yes.”

They waited.

“Very good.”

Tangle looked pleased. Then showed picture of me. I hadn’t seen it. I stood in meadow facing creek. Back mostly to camera. Hat on. Staff planted beside me. One hand resting on top. Blaze blurred farther out.

Katniss near boots. Echo on branch. Not posed. Not looking at camera. I looked old. Hard to say that about skeleton.

But somehow. Not tired. Not sad. Used. Like staff. Like Wayfinder. Like road.

“Tangle keeper?”

They nodded.

“Keeper.”

I looked longer.

“So am I.”

Tangle tilted head. I pointed at myself in image.

“Keeper.”

Tangle smiled.

“Bone keeper.”

“Apparently.”

Notebook came out after dark. I wrote: Tangle photographed woman on trail after asking permission. Sent copy through phone. Need to show them later how to move photographs off camera properly. Then: Bone — Keeper: trail leading through trees toward Wayfinder, Blaze, Katniss, Tangle in frame. Didn’t wait for empty trail. Pause. Then: Tangle — Keeper: creek reflection holding Blaze, Katniss, Echo, Bone, Tangle’s shadow. Everything.

Then: Tangle — Keeper: Bone at creek. Staff. Others nearby. I almost stopped. Then added: Different eyes do not need same answer. Closed notebook. Blaze asleep. Katniss asleep. Echo quiet. Tangle still awake. I sat outside Wayfinder alone for a while. No one followed. That mattered. Wind in trees. Creek farther away. Night settling. I still liked this. Being alone.

After a while I went back. Not because solitude had failed. Because I was done being alone for the evening. Different thing. Tangle had fallen asleep with camera bag under one hand. I moved charger cable away. Covered them. Then climbed into my place.

CHAPTER 74

Enough

The email arrived while I was brushing dust out of Wayfinder. Not cleaning. There was a difference. Cleaning implied victory. This was maintenance of defeat. Tangle sat on rear step with camera. Not taking pictures. Watching me lose argument with dirt.

“More.”

“I know.”

I brushed. More appeared. Tangle nodded.

“Wayfinder makes dirt.”

“That’s currently my leading theory.”

Phone buzzed on table. Lena. Subject: Eleanor Mercer I stopped brushing. Not because mystery had returned. Because name still did something. Eleanor. Not E. Not Mercer. Not photographer. Eleanor Mercer. I opened message. Lena had compared our notes with Ruth’s material. The historical society was updating its catalog. Where photographs had been listed only as E. Mercer, they would now identify photographer as Eleanor Mercer, with a note explaining supporting evidence.

North River Improvement Company commission. Talbot correspondence. Port Alder directory. Commercial advertisement. Hotel register. Mount records. Nothing dramatic. No lost diary. No secret expedition. No hidden fortune. A working photographer had done work. Then history had shortened her to an initial. We had given initial back a name. That was enough. Tangle watched.

“Mercer?”

“Yeah.”

They set camera down.

“Problem?”

I shook head.

“No problem.”

Tangle looked suspicious.

“Fixed?”

I smiled.

“Fixed enough.”

That seemed acceptable. I read rest. Ruth wanted copies of my notes about numbering and mount groups. Lena wanted permission to include one sentence from my reconstruction of likely job categories. I had apparently become source. Unfortunate. I wrote back: Use anything useful. Just separate what we know from what we think.

Then added: Tangle deserves credit for reorganizing the material into separate jobs instead of one route. I looked at Tangle. They were examining brush. Probably not concerned with citation practices. I sent anyway. Five minutes later Lena replied. Already planned to. How should I list Tangle? I laughed. Tangle looked up.

“What?”

I turned phone.

“Name.”

They pointed to themself.

“Tangle.”

“Yeah.”

I typed: Just Tangle. Send. That felt right. We drove into town later. Not same town as camera. Bigger. Two traffic lights. Excessive. We needed groceries, propane, and somewhere with decent internet. Also printer. I wanted paper copies. Not because digital files weren’t real. Because paper could be held. Probably old habit. Library had public computers and printer.

Good enough. Blaze stayed with me outside first while Tangle and I worked in shifts. Katniss stayed in Wayfinder. Echo stayed inside. Tangle sat at computer. This was mistake.

“Don’t touch.”

They touched mouse.

“That counts.”

Blank. I showed them trackpad equivalent. Cursor moved. Tangle’s ears lifted. Dangerous.

“Later.”

They sighed. I downloaded Lena’s final evidence summary. Printed it. One page. Then selected copies: directory entry. Talbot letter. voucher. hotel register. ad. Not everything. Enough. Tangle watched pages come from printer.

“Photo machine.”

"Sort of."

They held one page up.

"Eleanor."

I pointed at directory line.

"That's her."

Tangle stared. Not because they could read all of it. Because they knew what line meant.

"Name."

"Yeah."

We put papers into envelope. On front I wrote: Eleanor Mercer No question mark. That mattered. Tangle noticed.

"No E."

"No."

They smiled. Good. At post office I mailed copies to Ruth. Tangle watched envelope disappear through slot.

"Gone."

"Sent."

"Photo go."

"Exactly."

They nodded. Apparently all communication now categorized through photography. Fine. Outside, old brick wall caught afternoon light. I stopped. Tangle stopped.

"You take?"

"Maybe."

I looked. Wall. Fire escape. Shadow. Window with torn curtain. Good lines. But nothing held me.

"No."

Tangle raised camera. Click. Of course.

"What?"

They showed screen. Not wall. My hand holding Mercer envelope receipt. Old brick behind. Wayfinder reflected in glass door. Three pieces. Past. Now. Road. I looked at Tangle. They waited.

"Keeper?"

Tangle looked at screen.

"Keeper."

"Yeah."

I agreed. We bought groceries. Tangle did not photograph price tags. Growth. They did photograph row of shopping carts. Some growth. Back at Wayfinder, phone buzzed again. Ruth. Short message. Received Lena's update. We'll relabel the Mercer material as Eleanor Mercer where appropriate. Thank you both. Both. I showed Tangle.

"They know."

"Know Tangle?"

"Yeah."

Long pause.

"Mercer know?"

That one landed strangely. I looked at envelope receipt in hand.

"No."

Tangle waited.

"She's been gone a long time."

They understood gone. Then: "Still name." I looked at them.

"Yeah."

Still name. That was probably whole thing. We left town before evening. No destination. Just road. At pullout near low ridge, we stopped. Wind strong enough to make Echo unhappy. So he stayed inside. Katniss stayed near van. Blaze stretched. Tangle took camera. I took mine. We walked short distance. Nothing dramatic. Dry grass. Fence. Telephone pole. Road.

I photographed pole shadow crossing road. One frame. Good. Tangle wandered behind me. Click. I turned.

"People."

Tangle lowered camera.

"Bone permission."

I laughed.

"You already have standing permission for me."

Blank. Too complicated.

"Bone yes."

Tangle nodded.

"Always?"

I thought about it.

"Mostly."

Blank.

"Ask if close."

Tangle nodded. Good enough. They took another. Later showed me. My back. Camera down at side. Road ahead. Wayfinder behind. Not portrait. Not landscape. Transition. Tangle had become good at those. I took picture of Tangle too. Asked first.

"Tangle picture?"

They straightened immediately.

"No."

I lowered camera. Then Tangle turned around.

"Now."

I raised camera. They stood beside road. Staff planted. Camera bag across chest. Dark fur carrying little pieces of local grass and burrs they'd worked in that morning. Not smiling. Not posing exactly. Just standing. Click. One frame. Tangle came over.

"Good?"

I showed screen. They looked long time.

"Tangle."

"Yeah."

"Keeper."

"Yeah."

That one was mine. Interesting. Dinner at camp was quiet. Blaze ate. Katniss inspected. Echo objected. Tangle arranged spoon, bottle cap, and camera battery on table. I moved battery away from spoon.

"No."

Tangle frowned.

"Different."

"Yes. Very."

Afterward I opened notebook. Mercer section first. Last entry. Historical society updating attribution to Eleanor Mercer. Ruth has copies. Lena has supporting evidence. Tangle credited for separating jobs. I stared at page. Then wrote one more line. Enough. Closed that section. Not metaphorically. Actually. Turned page. Photography: Bone — Keeper: telephone-pole shadow crossing road.

Tangle — Keeper: Bone's hand holding Mercer mailing receipt, old brick behind, Wayfinder reflected in glass. Tangle — Keeper: Bone from behind, camera at side, road ahead, Wayfinder behind. Bone — Keeper: Tangle beside road with staff and camera bag. Four. Two each. Different again. Good. I closed notebook. Tangle sat beside Wayfinder. Camera in lap.

"Mercer done?"

This time answer was easy.

“Yeah.”

“Done done?”

I laughed.

“Done enough.”

Tangle considered.

“Road?”

“Tomorrow.”

They looked down road disappearing beyond dark.

“More.”

“Yeah.”

There would always be more. Not Mercer. Not necessarily mystery. Just road. That was better. Blaze settled near step. Katniss took her place. Echo quieted. Tangle leaned against Wayfinder. I sat a little apart. Not far. Just enough. Wind moved through grass. Nobody needed anything. For once, neither did I.

CHAPTER 75

On We Go

Morning came cold enough that even Blaze noticed. He stepped outside. Stopped. Looked at me.

“No.”

He went back inside. Reasonable. Katniss reached the doorway. Considered temperature. Turned around. Echo had opinions from enclosure. Tangle stood outside already. Camera bag across chest. Staff in hand. Completely unbothered.

“Cold.”

“Yes.”

Tangle looked at me.

“Good.”

“Of course you think that.”

Wayfinder started on second try. Which counted as confidence. We drove before sun cleared ridge. No destination. Just road. That felt right. For a while nobody made noise. Even Echo. Low light moved across open country. Fence lines. Dry fields. Distant hills. Road running ahead without asking anything. I liked mornings like that. Still did. That hadn’t changed.

Before Blaze, before Katniss, before Echo, before Tangle, I had spent whole days with nobody beside me. Good days. Not empty days. Important. I had never needed company to make road worthwhile. And now I had company. Also worthwhile. Different thing. Same road. Tangle lifted camera. Then lowered it. I looked over.

“No picture?”

They shook head.

“Not yet.”

I smiled. Good. We stopped at overlook after sunrise. Nothing marked. No sign. No plaque. No history waiting. Just gravel. Valley. Sky. Enough. Blaze came out this time. Apparently temperature had improved to acceptable dog standards. Katniss followed. Echo came out on forearm.

Tangle walked toward edge. I carried camera. Did not use it. At first. Tangle did.

Click. I looked over. They were photographing Wayfinder. Not whole van. Rear corner. Name. Marks underneath. Bone. Paw. Paw. Bird foot. Tangle. Spiral. Click. Tangle checked screen.

“Keeper?”

They nodded.

“Keeper.”

Good. I walked farther. Road below curved through valley. Would have made easy photograph. I had taken that photograph before. Not same road. Same idea. I lowered camera. Tangle noticed.

“Bone no?”

“Not today.”

They looked at road. Then me.

“Already?”

“Yeah.”

They understood. That surprised me less now. We stayed awhile. Blaze sniffed everything. Katniss found warm rock. Echo climbed from hand to shoulder and back. Tangle moved around with camera. Not constantly. Better now. More looking than clicking. That was probably all I had wanted to teach. Not how to see. Just how to wait long enough to notice.

Tangle crouched near ground. Click.

“What?”

They showed me. Five shadows. Mine. Blaze. Katniss. Tangle. Echo broken across shoulder and hat. Wayfinder edge cutting through frame. Not faces. Not bodies. Still us.

“Keeper?”

Tangle looked.

“Maybe.”

I laughed.

“You’ve learned too much.”

Blank. Good. We drove on. Late morning brought small town. Fuel. Coffee. Water. Nothing else needed. I parked beside diner. Blaze came with me. Tangle too. Katniss stayed inside. Echo stayed comfortable. We sat outside. Tangle camera on table. A waitress brought coffee. Tangle stared at mug.

“Bad.”

She looked at me.

“Friend doesn’t like coffee?”

“Friend has never had coffee.”

Tangle pointed.

“Still bad.”

Waitress laughed.

“Fair enough.”

Good. She walked away. Tangle watched her. Camera stayed down. I noticed.

“Good.”

They looked confused.

“Permission.”

Tangle nodded. No picture. Simple. Coffee tasted like diner coffee. Perfect. Blaze got water bowl. Tangle photographed bowl. Not Blaze. I asked: “Why?” They showed me. Water reflected sky. Blaze’s muzzle entered edge. My coffee cup in reflection too.

“Bad.”

Tangle pointed at coffee reflection.

“Bad.”

I laughed.

“Keeper?”

“Keeper.”

Naturally. We left town around noon. Wayfinder ran well. That always made me suspicious. Tangle sat near window. Camera in lap. Blaze slept. Katniss watched landscape. Echo made one unnecessary noise. There it was. Normal. I drove. Long road.

No problem to solve. No person to find. No place we had to reach. Just movement. That had always been enough. It still was. Afternoon brought wind. Strong. Wayfinder leaned slightly. I corrected. Tangle looked at me.

“Road push.”

“Wind.”

“Road push.”

“Fine.”

They smiled. We passed trail sign. I almost stopped. Didn’t. Another road appeared. I took it. No reason. Tangle looked over.

“Wrong?”

“No.”

“Why?”

"Why not?"

They considered. Then nodded. Good answer. Road became narrower. Then dirt. Wayfinder rattled. Echo objected. Blaze woke. Katniss looked offended. Tangle laughed. We continued. Eventually trees opened. Small lake. Not spectacular. No mountains reflected perfectly. No dramatic light. No hidden ruin. Just water. Shore. Pines. I parked. Tangle jumped out. Blaze followed. Katniss in harness. Echo with me.

We walked down. I carried camera. Still. At shoreline I stopped. Nothing obvious. Then I saw it. Not scene. Them. Blaze knee-deep in water. Katniss on flat rock. Echo perched low branch. Tangle crouched with camera, looking opposite direction. Nobody arranged. Nobody looking at me. I raised camera. Waited. Tangle stood. Blaze shook. Katniss moved. Echo shifted.

Everything wrong. Perfect. Click. One frame. Tangle heard. Turned.

"Bone keeper?"

I looked at screen. Blaze blurred from shake. Katniss half-step off rock. Echo wing slightly open. Tangle turning toward me. Not clean. Not composed. Alive.

"Yeah."

Keeper. Tangle walked over. Looked.

"Mess."

"Yeah."

They smiled.

"Good."

"Exactly."

We stayed until light softened. No more pictures from me. Tangle took one. Only one. I did not ask what. Not yet. Dinner near lake. Simple. Blaze dry enough. Katniss comfortable. Echo quiet. Tangle fiddling with bottle cap. I wrote notebook after. Not much.

Bone — Keeper: Blaze shaking water, Katniss stepping off rock, Echo shifting on branch, Tangle turning toward camera. Nothing held still. Then: Tangle — Keeper: unknown. Tangle says later. I looked over. They were still reviewing screen.

"Show me?"

Tangle shook head.

"Later."

Fine. Night came. Cold again. Everybody inside. I sat outside alone. Same as night before. Not because I wanted distance. Because I wanted quiet. There was difference. I listened to lake. Wind. Trees. Wayfinder cooling. I thought about first trail. Not first ever. First one that felt like

mine. No Blaze. No Katniss. No Echo. No Tangle. Just me. Staff. Camera. Road.

Good trail. I would not change it. Then I thought about now. Wayfinder. Blaze. Katniss. Echo. Tangle. Also good. I would not change that either. Some trails were better alone because they needed silence. Some were better together because somebody else noticed what I missed. Most probably didn't care. Roads rarely did. I sat there until cold worked through coat.

Then went inside. Tangle was awake. Camera in hand.

"Now."

They showed me final photograph. Wayfinder from distance. Night beginning. Rear name visible. Blaze near door. Katniss on step. Echo small shape inside. Me sitting outside alone. And Tangle's reflection faint in side window. All of us. Together. Me alone. Same frame. I looked a long time.

"Tangle keeper?"

They nodded.

"Keeper."

"Yeah."

Very. Morning came clear. We packed. No ceremony. Blaze settled in. Katniss found her place. Echo made one unnecessary noise. Tangle lifted camera. I started Wayfinder. Engine caught. Road waited. I looked ahead.

"All right," I said.

"And on we go."

The journey continues.

STRANGEWOVEN

The journey continues.