

NEEDLE CAST



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Needle Cast

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Chapter 1

VIP Shipment

The driver eased the truck against the rubber bumpers of the dock and sent a tremor through the boards. Diesel exhaust stayed close to the boards in the cold air. He rolled his window down for Vince's hand signals and then let the rig idle, vibration running through metal into wood, into legs. Warren stood at the green chain with his gloves clean, palms chalked with resin dust, and watched the rig straighten in the mirror bolted to the bay.

The line moved fast for late December. Trees came in from the yard in a tidy procession, crowns symmetrical, skirts trimmed, the color wrong. A wet, too-green shine on the needles reflected the yard lights even in mid-day brightness. The netter's belts squealed and the cutter's teeth threw a mist that tasted of copper under pine. Warren swallowed it and kept his mask up. The spray tracked across his glasses in a fine film and he wiped it with a knuckle out of reflex. Taped hinge, still intact.

Vince slapped the steel with an open hand. "Let's move," he said. "Weather's early." He checked his dead watch and lifted his chin at the driver. "Back another foot."

By hand signals, the driver nudged the trailer forward and braked. The dock plate dropped with an impact that made a stack of VIP tags slide. Maya bundled a set with a rubber band and bumped Warren's shoulder. "You want labels?" She kept her gaze on the tree bases coming through the netter.

"You keep pace. I'll tag," he said. His voice stayed low. He slid the first glossy tag, black with silver font, a crest that meant overpriced, through the twine at the trunk. Tag, cinch, tug to confirm closure.

Forty-nine more.

Davi stood by the baler and fed trunks into the mouth with smooth timing. He cracked jokes that barely carried over the wood-on-metal racket. Nolan ran the twine spool with exaggerated focus, his breath visible every time he turned into the light that leaked through the bay seams. The greenhouse windows across the yard reflected the shed and the moving crew. The panes were spotless; reflected winter light forced a squint.

"Keep it straight," Vince called. "Premium only. No culls in the VIP load."

Warren counted crowns without thinking. The Titans ran near identical, apical dominance strong, internodal spacing disciplined, lateral branches evenly tiered with almost no variance. Resin beaded at each fresh cut, thicker than he expected in this temperature. He could assign numbers to everything he saw and had for most of his life. It felt safe to count. Safety meant very little here.

The first trunk hit the baler throat and produced a high, sharp squeal. Davi winced and grinned and kept feeding. Warren's hands worked while his eyes slid to the floor at the base of the last netter roller, where sweepings collected into mats. A snapped root about the length of a hand fell from the skirt of a Titan as they hauled it forward. It struck the deck, rolled, and then moved again after the impulse should have dissipated. A quick scuttle toward the seam where two boards met.

He blinked. The root segment was white, fine as a pencil on its thickest point, with threadlike hairs tufting the tip. Severed xylem and phloem should not transmit anything after a minute or two of desiccation in this air. It reached the seam, contacted it, and adjusted orientation by a few degrees.

Warren crouched with a slow hinge of his knees that did not alarm anyone. He extended one gloved knuckle and nudged the white tip. It recoiled by a centimeter. No delay. He waited. It resumed a slow crawl.

He thought of thigmonastic responses and rejected the thought as nonsense in a conifer segment cut from its vascular context. Temperature? Static charge? Residual turgor pressure? None explained movement on a dry board in airflow.

The netter squealed again, loud enough to sting his ears. A chain saw bit cambium at the other end of the shed and the released aerosol hit his tongue metallic. The metallic note returned under the resin. He knew that smell from emergency rooms. He did not need it here.

"Vince," he said, rising. He indicated the dock with his chin and a tight motion at the root piece. "You seeing this?"

Vince spared the floor a glance, then pointed at the sky past the dock opening. Low clouds thickened and darkened. "Clock," he said. "Storm's early. Load the damn trees."

"It moved," Warren said. The words came out flat.

"I got thirty more to clock. It's a root. Grab a broom when you're done counting." Vince's lips twitched in a not-quite smile that carried irritation more than humor. He clapped his hands for attention. "Double-time."

Davi turned back to the baler and fed the next trunk without looking over.

Maya glanced at him, jaw set. "You good?"

"Fine." He kept his tone neutral, eyes down.

He palmed a sample bag from his inner pocket, the kind he used for seed envelopes and skin checks. He trapped the root tip between gloved fingers with minimal force and coaxed it into the bag before the next bundle of trunks came through and would have stamped it into pulp. The tip contacted the polyethylene and tracked along it in short movements that left a smear of moisture. He sealed the bag and tucked it inside his sweater to prevent freeze damage to cellular structure. The plastic set a cool circle against his ribs. The ridge of the zip pressed through wool when he bent. Davi let out a short, dismissive snort without breaking

rhythm at the baler.

Trees kept coming. Each Titan wore a premium tag, each net cinched, each trunk tethered to a pallet in the rig. The driver signed the bill Vince shoved at him, and Vince signed back with a hard dig of pen on carbon paper. The driver pulled his gloves on tight and climbed into the cab.

Warren stepped clear of the roll-up door. He watched the truck's brake lights flare and then dim as the vehicle moved down the access. Tires pushed slush to the edge of the ruts. Through thickening flakes, the taillights blurred and disappeared behind the switchbacks and then dropped behind the trees. Gone.

Jaw tight, he breathed once and swallowed. He thought of hours standing by a centrifuge during acceleration. The truck was gone. Nothing to do. He returned to the chain and checked each crown for symmetry.

Vince clapped again. "Run the shed 'til we're out of light. Then we'll see." He faced the yard and made a small motion at nothing in particular, a habit he used to settle himself. He checked his dead watch though the hands never moved.

Another Titan rolled into the netter. A high-frequency squeal from the belts cut through the other machine noise. White needles notched into the belt felt, caught, and sprang free. Aerosol off the cut met cold air and hissed. The squeal and the metallic taste stayed with him while he worked.

He took the perimeter alone when Vince sent Nolan for chain oil and Maya for coffee. Cold air burned the membranes in his nose and tightened the skin on his cheeks. From the shed, metal on wood carried clearly in the still air. Wind blew off the west slope in broad gusts across the ridge and over the planted blocks of Titans.

Miller Fir's grid divided the ridge into squares with a precision that annoyed him. Ten by ten, alley, ten by ten. Lines you could sight with a rangefinder. The ground under the trees had been sprayed clean of understory one month ago and again two weeks ago. No fern colonies, no sword ferns collapsing under snow, no huckleberry shrubs, only duff scuffed to mineral.

He kept tally of the rows despite himself. Row spacing uniform at two meters; trees set at identical distances along the lines. The layout followed industrial spacing, uniform and exact. He stopped at the fence line where the property ended and the slope fell to the river in a jag. Down there the river ran gray and congested with ice-free slurry.

Beyond the fence, older Douglas-firs moved under the same wind that hit his face. Their crowns rolled through arcs in recognizable patterns. The Titans behind him did not show the same lateral motion. Stems had minimal deflection. Wind passed through their branches and made a muted chitter. The needles flashed the same wrong sheen in ambient light.

He moved along a tractor path toward a stump that had been left after a cull. The cut was smooth and recent. Sap bled down the side in a thick ribbon and had not set fully in the cold. White tissue showed along the radial lines where the xylem rays would run. It looked added rather than developed with the tree. Kneeling at the stump, he leaned in. He pressed a thumbnail at the edge of the cut. The pale fiber yielded with resistance and then parted in a single strand that held together instead of fraying as lignified tissue would. He rolled it between forefinger and thumb through the glove. Smooth, not woody, no particulate drag.

At the stump's base, surface roots the thickness of a finger threaded out toward the alley between blocks. He touched one lightly. Retraction came in a crisp movement, not a slow turgor shift. The root pulled a few millimeters and held position. He waited for elastic return. None. He touched again. Another small recoil. This breached his baseline framework for conifer physiology in these temperatures.

He thought of demonstrations for schoolchildren with *Mimosa pudica*, and of time-lapse potted vines turning toward light over hours, and of measurement of action potentials in plant cells under stimuli. He thought of how long most plant motions took when stripped of narrative exaggeration. His glove printed a clean oval on the dust where his hand rested. The root lay still.

He looked back at the greenhouse windows. The glass shone even under gray light. The long bench inside would hold sprayers and plug trays. He pictured trays now even if he knew they were gone for the season. That was how his head worked. Fill gaps with probable steps until something contradicted them.

The wind picked up and settled into a steadier flow. The pressure change registered as weight in his ears. He listened for the heavy scrape of a county plow on the approach road. Nothing metal, only trees rattling and the low huff from the generator that sometimes kicked on during load shifts. A distant rumble came from the west and faded at the crest without resolving into anything mechanized. Weather, not a vehicle. He stood and tightened his parka at the neck.

He took the bag with the root tip from his sweater, checked the seal, and pressed the air out to keep the tip in contact with the inner plastic. He slid it deeper inside his layers, under the second sweater against his sternum. Moisture beaded on the inside of the bag and made a thin fog. He did not want the tissue to freeze before he could view it under magnification. The mess hall had a mounted magnifier used for sorting ornaments and pulling slivers. It would do for a first pass. He kept his pace even. He walked as if he had nothing in his clothing he cared about.

Sparse pellets began to fall and struck his cheeks. They hit the cut on his lower lip he had forgotten about. He closed his mouth and breathed through his nose. His breath made a small puff of vapor that blew sideways and broke apart. The road into the yard already showed a film. In an hour it would take chains, and in two it would take more than that. He went back toward the shed at a steady pace.

On the way he passed a row-end where branches brushed the fence wire. The contact points had shaved bark off the wire and left resin on the steel. He put his gloved finger to it. The resin stayed tacky. The temperature should have set it. He wiped his finger on the fence post and kept going.

The bunkhouse television had a crack across the lower right corner; lower portions of faces fell under the line on close shots. Warren stood near the back with his gloves hooked in his belt. The county station ran a red crawl along the bottom with standby language and a forecast for totals that would close the road until crews cut a path. A meteorologist listed an atmospheric river setup with cold air trapped east of the Cascades and moisture stacking against it. The audio cracked and chopped. The picture went to artifact and then back to the map with a second of delay.

Nolan leaned forward on the couch with his elbows on his knees. "So, we're stuck, right?"

"We're not stuck until I say stuck," Vince said from the doorway. He pushed the door wide; cold air flowed in and stripped warmth. He stood with his hands on his hips near the threshold. "We got a delivery out. We push one more run through the shed, we get ahead. That's a win."

Davi raised a hand. "What about the road?"

"Road's open now. Clear the line." Vince stepped toward the TV and smacked the top. The sound dropped for a moment and came back in a hiss. "Turn that off, it's noise."

From the back, Warren watched the heater's needle on the oil tank move down, the rate faster than he liked. Gauge at a third. At this draw, eight hours, maybe less. Rooms like this lost heat fast. The only way to keep it was to pour fuel into it. He cleared his throat. "We could set heat

lower tonight," he said. "Sixty-two. Conserve diesel. Less temperature gradient under the roof keeps ice load off the lines and stretches runtime if the grid drops."

Vince turned with a small laugh. "Professor here wants us to freeze because of 'temperature gradients.'" He curled his fingers in quotations. "You got a space heater in your room, Doc?"

"No," Warren said. He had a second sweater and a wool hat he slept in when he had to.

"We keep it at sixty-eight," Vince said. "People work better when they sleep. You drop it below that, people stop sleeping. You'll freeze us."

"Sixty-eight is generous," Maya said, glancing at the heater. She slid her beanie back and scratched above her ear. "But I'm not voting to freeze. I need the hours."

Warren caught her eye and looked away. He shifted his weight to keep the bag from rustling in his sweater. The sample pressed a cool patch against his chest. He could feel the edge of the zip through the wool. He said nothing else. He tasted resin on the back of his tongue again and swallowed it with stale coffee from earlier.

Davi stood and stretched until his shoulders popped. "Run 'til dark, then?"

"Run 'til dark," Vince said. He pointed at Nolan. "You get chain oil and clear sawdust out of the baler throat. Jams cost time. Maya, check the netter belts. Warren, you keep the tags clean and don't slow the chain for inspections." He glanced at Warren in a way that said he remembered every time Warren had paused a line. "We got orders stacked for tomorrow."

"The switchbacks," Nolan said. "If it sticks, "

"If it sticks, we shovel. We got grit and shovels and chains and a winch." Vince spread his hands at the room. "This is what we do. We don't quit because of a weather clip."

Maya pulled her gloves on and smacked them against her palms. "Let's go."

Warren held a breath for a second and released it through his nose. The heater ticked. Weight moved through the floor into the slab; he felt the path through his boots. He thought about trying again with Vince, heat load and fuel numbers that might land. He let it go and followed the others out.

On the threshold the snow hit him full in the face. It had advanced from sting to steady. The yard lay in expanding sheets of white on green, the blocks of Titans cleaner under it than the older trees, outlines precise for now. The greenhouse glass made a pale field on the left. The shipping office door rattled at the loose latch. He held the knob until the gusts passed and then let it go.

They walked toward the shed with their shoulders hunched and their heads down. Footfalls struck the gravel and the underlying slab under the shed, transmitting small vibrations that his body registered out of habit. He measured everything without instruments. It didn't change the next step.

Inside, machine noise climbed again. Vince clapped twice. The crew went back to their jobs. Warren lined his tags on the bench and kept them from sticking to each other. Resin made surfaces tacky. He breathed through his nose and worked.

Through the open bay he could see the grid of Titans holding neat in the fall of snow. The Douglas-firs beyond moved unevenly and shed powder in sheets when gusts shook them. The Titans shed less. They did not reach far with their limbs. They did not match the movement across the fence. He noted each difference and kept it in order. His hands kept pace with the work.

Light faded toward dusk. They ran the baler until the light above the netter hummed and flickered with each voltage dip. Vince called a halt only when the conveyor belt jerked and slowed; the whole pace dropped.

He swore, checked his dead watch for habit's sake, and waved them off for a quick heat and food break before the last push.

He returned to the line without remark. Maya's shoulder brushed his as she passed. Davi laughed at the far end of the shed. Nolan jogged with jerky calves under too-thin pants. He pictured the bunkhouse heater across the yard. His cheeks stung less for a moment.

He took his place. He returned to the chain and focused on the twine. The tube over the netter flickered in half-second beats, and the ballast buzz dropped a note before it steadied.

Chapter 2

Atmospheric River

The storm did not build in gentle grades. The snowfall reached full intensity in under a minute. Snow came in hard bands across the ridge, a white density that hid edges and then returned them for seconds before hiding them again. The reflectors on the first switchback showed as two dull squares and then lost all contrast. By the time Warren stepped to the bunkhouse window with his gloves off and his breath showing, the road was no longer a line; it was a raised shape the wind scoured and filled. The VIP truck had been gone for hours when the storm hit this hard.

He set two fingers against the glass and pulled them back at the sting of cold that moved through it. The plastic zip ridge of the sample bag pressed against his sternum under two sweaters. The circle of plastic stayed cold even with his body heat, and he tracked it without thinking. Outside, a taller gust pushed snow sideways in one sheet and then another. The yard lights flattened and fuzzed. The greenhouse panes on the left had lost all reflection; they read as opaque panels with an occasional smear where the snow slid. The planted blocks of Titans beyond the processing shed still showed as dark lines in a grid, the alleys filling from west to east in a steady sheet.

“Damn,” Davi said behind him. “That’s a lot of money falling out of the sky.”

Vince stood by the door with the handle in his hand as if keeping it shut by grip alone would matter. He checked the dead watch at his wrist and then looked toward the TV even though it was off. Nolan hovered near the heater, palms held out as if the air gave something you could catch.

A flash came low beyond the tree line, a blue-white spike with a sharp crack that carried through the insulation. The overhead bulbs went dark and only the outlines remained: the door frame, the heater's rectangle, the couch back, the cut top edge of the TV's cracked screen. Someone swore in the dark. The heater shut down with a clunk and the hum vanished. Footsteps shifted the load on the slab.

For two seconds they stood in the absence of any powered sound. Then, from the generator shack beyond the mess hall, a starter whined and caught. The diesel engine took a moment to get into rhythm and then held. The heater's blower came on with a hollow rush. Warmth did not arrive; it started moving again. A faint draft rose along the wall and out through the vent. On the roof, snow above the flue began to slump and channel. Outside, a narrow column above the vent broke the uniform surface. Vapor rose and moved sideways with the wind, showing gray against the snowfall.

Warren drew his fingers across the cold pane until his skin squeaked. He stepped closer to the glass and squinted through the distortions. The Titans he could see through the shed's open bay were not moving on the wind's pattern. The older Douglas-firs past the fence rolled and shed powder as gusts hit them. The Titans in the grid had almost no lateral sway. Their crowns rotated by degrees. The laterals on the side facing the bunkhouse lifted and held. They set to a shared bearing.

He looked toward the roof again. The melt-line ran true, a wet trench through snow that started at the flue cap and cut upward until the wind spread it. The melt trench on the roof lined up with the rows facing the vent.

Maya stopped at his shoulder. She had her beanie pulled low and snow in the knit. Her breath fogged the glass and faded. "You seeing that?" she asked.

"Yes." He kept his voice low. "They're orienting to the heat column."

“They’re trees,” Nolan said from across the room, tone too high and trying for casual. “They’re just stiff because of the cold.”

Warren took a breath that tightened his chest and said, “Branches don’t hold a bearing in a gust unless something internal takes load and keeps it.” He did not say what that something might be. Not here. “Reduce the gradient, and we reduce the attraction. If we drop the setpoint we can get the plume thinner. Drop it five degrees; the plume at the vent will rise lower by about a meter, and the blower duty cycle drops around twenty percent.”

Maya rubbed her jaw with two knuckles. She watched the heater and then the window. “If we do that and the generator fails, that’s hypothermia in two hours,” she said. “Everyone’s wet.”

Vince turned. He gave a short dry laugh. “We’re not playing thermostat games,” he said. “Sixty-eight keeps hands working. Company cold-stress policy is sixty-eight. I’m not sending anyone to a hospital or writing an OSHA report because some scientist wants to run a science experiment on body heat.” He snorted once. “Storm nerves. The storm will make you see patterns.” He jabbed at the door with his chin. “We have a shed. Orders stand. Keep the line moving; keep hands warm. That’s policy.”

“Warmth draws,” Warren said before he stopped himself. He spoke softer. “It’s not theoretical.”

“What draws is the shipping schedule,” Vince said. “Get your gloves. We move.”

Vince opened the door. The cold hit the room in a flat shove. They zipped and pulled hats down without talking, grabbed what they needed, and stepped into it.

Outside the door the wind carried loose snow hard enough to sting exposed skin. The shove of it stripped heat in seconds. Vince stepped into it with his shoulders set. Davi pulled his hood tight with one hand and carried his coffee with the other. Nolan rushed to keep up, boots slipping

a half-step and then catching. Maya hung back a breath with Warren and then shook her head once, a small motion that meant nothing to anyone else.

They crossed the yard in a tight cluster. Distance from the door to the shed stretched longer than the yard could be; wind and drift pushed them off course every few steps. Heads were down. Snow stuck to the unshaved parts of faces. Under the noise of the wind, Warren picked up a lower vibration transmitted through the slab. The generator had settled into a steady state.

Between bursts he looked up. The first two rows of Titans on the near side had their laterals angled toward the bunkhouse roof. Minute changes, no more than degrees, shifted their profile into a shape that did not match the wind. In the small windows between white sheets he watched crowns adjust, hold, adjust. Rows one through four angled laterals toward the shed mouth and the bunkhouse roof vent; the aisle between them narrowed by degrees when bodies gathered at the door. *Pseudotsuga menziesii* on the far slope moved in a different pattern and let loose powder this side did not. He named *Abies grandis*, *Abies procera*, *Abies* whatever would normally live here. These were not those.

Maya caught his glance upward and followed it. “Nope,” she said, not to him and not to anyone else. Snow plastered one side of her beanie. She tucked her hands under her armpits and moved faster.

At the shed, they shouldered through the roll-up that wouldn’t roll all the way down in cold. Snow collected at the lip and smeared into slush under boots. The air inside carried a mixture of resin and diesel. A metallic note carried under pine again, the same taste that had landed on his tongue earlier. The netter belts hung still. The baler sat empty. Everything carried a touch of frost.

Vince clapped his hands twice and then held his palms out to the crew as if counting bodies. “Start-up,” he said. “Nolan, check the oil. Davi, clear the throat and stage. Maya, get on the loader and meter the feed. We

keep it clean and we keep it moving.”

“What about the road?” Nolan asked toward the floor. He watched his own boots.

“The road will be there when the county puts a plow on it,” Vince said. “We make sure there’s a reason to put a plow on it.”

Warren moved to the bench where the VIP tags had sat earlier. Resin had glued dust to the surface in irregular patches; he scraped with a thumbnail and rolled a grainy edge aside. The mounted magnifier he needed sat in the mess hall, three doors and a courtyard away. He could picture the bag under his sweater opening and the white tip inching across the table under cheap glass. He pressed his palm against the bag under his chest once and then let his hand drop. It would wait. The generator did not.

The baler belts began to run. The squeal returned almost at once as wet weight hit a roller and stripped traction. Hot rubber reached his nose. Maya brought the loader up slow and set the first Titan into position with care that would have read as tender if that word belonged in this place. The trunk slid, paused, and moved again as belt teeth found purchase. The baler’s mouth took the end with a jerking motion. The squeal pitched higher and then dropped as it took load. A dry bearing timbre crept into it and the volume climbed by a few decibels. The netter tubes rattled on their mounts.

Across the yard, a gust cleared the snowfall for a few seconds. Warren looked out through the bay. In that brief clarity he saw the first four rows of Titans turn in sequence. Branches rotated along their bases, not the long whip you’d see under a gust. A creak came across the open space. It carried on the air and the surface of the slab both. In the Douglas-firs, a gust dislodged a sheet of powder and it fell. The Titans shed almost nothing.

“Not the wind,” he said, without knowing he’d spoken.

“Not now,” Vince said, without looking at him. “Keep the line moving.”

The generator’s sound sat in Warren’s bones as a steady thrum. Years of labs and field stations had taught him how power moved through structures. The heater blew across the bunkhouse and pushed a column into the dark that no one could see now. Warm air exited a flue and carried buoyancy and scent molecules with it. If he could see a thermal image, the bunkhouse would show as a bright shape, and the loader’s engine would register hotter than the background. He breathed through his mouth and let the metallic resin stay on his tongue this time. Taste could be a measurement when the instruments weren’t here.

“Cutting the heat would reduce the plume,” he said to Maya, close to her shoulder. He kept his tone even. “Heat moves by convection. You thin the gradient, you thin the draw. The whole system responds to gradients.”

“The whole system is people who get cold,” she said. She pushed the loader’s lever and nudged the next trunk forward. “If Vince says no, it’s no.” Her voice was flat and steady. She stared where she had to stare to do the job.

Nolan crossed behind them with a jug of chain oil, head down, shoulders hunched in an effort to make himself smaller. “It’s loud,” he said to no one. “My teeth hurt.”

From the lower edge of the grove, a smell came up that did not belong to winter. It wasn’t rot from summer; it was rot released by thaw. Something had a heat source and a closed surface, and when wind shifted, the liberated gases found the nose. Warren recognized ferment even when cold tried to clamp it down. Alcohols, aldehydes, sulfur traces. He didn’t have the words to pin each molecule, but his head mapped it anyway.

He crossed to the wall with the emergency kit and pulled the latch on the red case. Flares lay in a row with a striker taped to the lid. He lifted one and weighed it in his hand. The packaging was intact. He pushed it

into the deep pocket of his parka and pressed it in until it sat tight. No one said anything. Vince would have, if he had seen it. Vince watched the baler and the loader with fixed attention.

Maya set another trunk into the throat. Snow clung to needles and melted at the cut face where resin bled. Davi moved along the line with a hook in one hand, pulling stray branches out of a belt's path. He kept his jokes to himself now, jaw tight, eyes snapping to problem spots. His movements stayed tight and economical. He bumped Warren as he passed and said, "You'll get your microscope time later, Doc," and then stepped on.

A bang sounded outside, not close. Not another transformer. Something heavier. The wind shoved through the bay and drove a spatter of grit and snow across the floor. Warren set his feet and leaned. Beyond the shed's threshold, Titans across three rows oriented again. Their laterals swung to the left in sequence. He forced himself not to fix the word that wanted to land. They set to a direction that matched the bunkhouse column and the shed's open mouth where the baler motor threw heat. They held and then edged.

"Do you hear that?" he said to Maya.

"Hear what?" Maya kept her eyes on the fork tips and the trunk.

"Creak frequency," he said. "It's changing with the intervals when we stop and start. It's following the on-off pattern of the belts." He heard himself and wanted the words back. He was doing the thing that kept him out of fights and got bodies hurt when fights didn't care about data. But data was still the only way he knew how to speak. "Our heat signal is adding to the bunkhouse's."

"Then we should work faster," Vince said. He didn't turn around. "Get it done before it gets worse."

"Or cut load," Warren said. He kept his tone neutral and chose words for an adult who would listen. "Less motor run time lowers convection. If we break and shut down between runs, "

“And then we run all night to make up for it?” Vince said. “Not happening.” He slapped the steel guard with the flat of his hand, a sharp report that drew Nolan’s eyes and made his shoulders jump. “Move.”

Warren went back to his bench. He lined up twine spools and tags with the backs of his fingers. The simple grid made his breath even out. He counted contact points his eyes could find. He cataloged species names again until Latin got in the way of the English he needed to speak.

The baler threw a higher note under strain. The belts showed shine where slippage polished them, and the hot rubber smell came stronger. Davi swore, reached in with the hook, and teased a knot of branches free before they rode back under the roller. “Little shit,” he said. He set the hook and pulled. The trunk moved into the throat, then stalled, then lurched forward a half-turn. The squeal cut and then returned as the belt caught. The bearing note sharpened.

Warren stepped sideways for a view down the line that didn’t risk distracting Davi. He timed the flex of the branch above the baler against the last two minutes of Davi’s movements. The branch lifted when Davi stepped closer and fell by a measurable amount when he stepped back, not immediately, but in a patterned lag. He watched three cycles and counted a lag near seven-tenths of a second between Davi’s step and the branch response. He watched three more to be sure and then forced himself to breathe before he said anything.

“Davi,” he said, pitching his voice to cut against the machine. “Give it a beat. Let me, ”

Davi glanced up and grinned reflexively. “It’s fine,” he said. “I’ve done worse.” He reached in with the hook for a small jam that looked easy.

The baler motor warmed the shed in a way he could measure by breath. The air fogged two feet off the floor where cold and warm layers met. Condensation marked the housing for the motor and made a skin across it. Resin’s copper trace reached into the back of Warren’s mouth and sat there. He coughed once to clear it and didn’t clear it.

Vince stood with his hands at his hips, weight canted forward, chest out under the heavy coat that didn't zip all the way because of the gut he'd earned here. He checked his dead watch and then the line. His eyes tracked the tree, not the man working it.

Outside, a crack ran through ice on the dumpster near the bay and split the film into plates that floated on the slurry inside. Snow blew through the opening in one direction, then the other. The Titans' laterals just beyond the threshold held their bias toward the shed. The muscles across Warren's shoulders tightened.

"Hold," Warren said, louder now. "The branch angles are responding to," He swallowed the rest. He did not have names he could lay down that Vince would pick up. Not yet. "Stop the feed for a minute."

Maya did pause. Her hand came off the lever. The loader's engine idle steadied. For a second, the pitch inside the shed moved from many things happening at once to fewer things, and then Vince put it back. "No," he said. "Not for a minute. We don't stop this line. Clear it."

Davi set the hook again and stepped in. The branch above him flexed a fraction. Warren's jaw locked; his next breath stuck. He slid one foot forward without knowing he had, and then set it back, because the wrong move near machinery gets more people hurt than it saves. He tried again with words.

"Davi," he said, "use the hook only. Don't put your hand in."

Davi held up the hook between two fingers and smirked thinly. "You want to come do it, Doc?"

"Just keep the gap," Warren said. He could hear the edge in his own voice.

Nolan hovered near the control panel for the netter and watched Davi with parted lips. His teeth chattered once and then stopped when he bit down. He looked at Vince and back at Davi, searching for a cue. He put his hand on the emergency stop and then took it off because no one had

told him to press it.

The baler sounded different now. The load had shifted to something more uneven, or the belts had accumulated enough wet to change friction. Either way, the tone carried too close to the one from earlier in the day when the first trunk had thrown a squeal that made Davi wince and then keep feeding anyway. Warren's hands, useless and clean at the bench, curled into fists without him wanting them to. He forced them to open, placed them on the bench, and spread his fingers flat on the tacky resin so they would stay.

Across the way, in a moment of clearer visibility, Warren saw the near row of Titans take a small step inward that was not wind at all. It was the sum of small movements across many trunks and roots that turned into a shift. His breath paused; he fixed the change as a measurable shift.

"Don't," he said. "Not yet, "

Davi held.

The lights overhead flickered once as the generator took a wobble under load elsewhere. The hum came back steady. The fog over the motor thickened a touch. Resin kept bleeding at the cut faces. The smell of ferment from the lower grove drifted in on a low eddy and sat under the pine.

Branches angling, heat rising, belt pitch increasing, he mapped the components and could not stop the machine. The branch, the throat, the hand. He held still through one long breath. The jam held. The branch above Davi flexed another degree.

Warren took the breath he'd been missing and readied to move where he would have to move.

Between the shed and the bunkhouse the wind shifted to a straighter push that came from a few degrees north of west and stayed consistent enough for a time he could predict its weight. In that window, the Planted Ten, what Vince called the section closest to the shed in a half-joke that had no humor now, adjusted laterals toward the shed's mouth and the bunkhouse roof both. A halo formed around two of the nearest Titans, not much, just enough mist to show condensation around needles and twig ends. Not breath; condensation from heat at the surface of something warmer than the air that moved over it.

"We have another problem," Warren said to Maya in the lull between trunks. He kept his voice so low the words almost didn't exist. "That's heat exchange. Metabolic rate increases in cold shouldn't present like that. Not in conifers at night."

"What do you want me to do with that?" she said, still not looking at him, eyes fixed on fork tips and shadows around the baler mouth. "You want me to tell Vince? You want to turn the heat off and get us in a different kind of trouble?"

"I want us to reduce the signature we're throwing," he said. "We can take it down five degrees. Even three. Cut motor rest time in half. Keep bodies off the deck when we don't need to be near the throat." He swallowed. "I can't prove the causal link yet. But the pattern is consistent with our heat sources being mapped and followed."

Maya's throat worked. "Are they just trees?" she asked. Her voice carried no appeal, only a check to see if she could still say the old thing and hold to it for another hour.

"Reactive systems," he said.

She blew out a breath. "Then we make our system smaller," she said, almost to herself. She set the next trunk. She hadn't promised anything. She had set an intention and kept her hands moving in a job that punished hands that stopped.

On the far side of the shed, Vince barked orders at Nolan without turning. “Oil, now. Keep it fed, keep it clean. Don’t let the throat starve.” His voice stayed in one register. Warren had heard that in men who’d run crews long enough that orders came out the same no matter the noise around them.

Nolan moved and made himself move right. He handled tools as if he had read instructions and pretended not to. He watched other men’s hands and mirrored. Warren felt the pull to park the kid in a corner with a blanket and a thermos and keep him there until the road opened. He did not have authority. He did not even have the words that would get Vince to move the kid. He had a flare in his pocket that would burn at two thousand degrees and complicate everything.

From the lower grove, the ferment odor came strong again when the wind line shifted, amyl notes, earth, thawed leaf mold. Pockets of heat released gases from spots he couldn’t see. That would be true even if the planted blocks had not been revised in ways Warren did not yet have names for.

He looked back to the baler.

Maya had the loader angled and held. Davi had his boot planted against a rib on the baler frame. The hook was set. Vince had his hands open and palms up as if repelling an argument before it started. Nolan stood too close to the emergency stop without pressing it. All of it made a picture Warren did not want to see because he had seen it before with lab coats and a centrifuge lid.

He could pick out the subfloor vibration now apart from the generator. It tracked to the bunkhouse heater when the blower cycled and then dropped for a few seconds when the thermostat clicked and then came back. When the blower clicked off, laterals in the closest rows eased by about a degree; within two seconds of the next click, the angle returned. Each time, the Titans in the closest rows edged their laterals toward the shed’s opening by a small amount and settled.

“Vince,” Warren said. “I’m asking you to let us take three degrees off. Keep the blower cycles longer and less frequent. With the generator carrying the load, you’ll get fuel back for the engine here.” He kept the ask to numbers, not fear.

Vince snapped his head around. “I don’t need your fuel math,” he said. “I need this line to move. You’re not the boss here. You want to help, keep the tags dry and don’t slow the belt with a lecture. And don’t hand me a comp claim when someone freezes because you guessed wrong.”

The loader’s hydraulics hissed very softly. Maya was steady on the lever. Davi kept one hand on the hook and one on the frame.

Warren’s mouth went dry. He swallowed and got the taste of resin again. Copper stayed under it. He looked to the bay and then back at Davi. He felt the zip ridge of the sample bag against bone when he breathed in and out; the pressure point kept him in his body where he needed to be.

“Davi,” he said. “Full stop. Two seconds.”

Davi didn’t stop.

“Hey!” Vince’s voice cracked for the first time. “We’re slipping the schedule.”

They all were. The room held that truth in ordinary volumes: motor pitch, breath, a clatter from the netter, the soft smack of wet needles against metal. On the roof of the bunkhouse, snow continued to shear along the cut the flue made through it. The plume from the vent rose and spread. The planted blocks beyond the door adjusted into the shape they had been adjusting into for the last hour.

Warren set his palm flat to the bench and bent his knees to move. He had already aligned his body to go where he would go if the jam gave or the branch moved in a way it had no right to move.

He held his breath and then let it out slow.

Davi leaned.

Positions locked. Davi leaned into the frame; the branch above him held; the belts carried load.

Snow came again in a harder band that overshot the shed roof and dropped a heavy fringe along the open bay. Powder built on resin spray and stayed until vibration shattered it and slid it off in ridged sheets. The yard's access road existed only as a shape under a fresh foot of accumulation. The narrow steel bridge below would be a single lane buried and slick; no one would be driving over it tonight.

The generator held. The heater kept blowing. The flue put heat into air that condensed into vapor, and the vapor marked a pale column. Below, in planted ground, rows kept their bearing toward the column and the open bay.

Inside the shed, with the baler squealing and the motor warming the air enough to fog, the men and the woman kept working because Vince told them to and because stopping would freeze hands.

Warren pressed his cold tongue to the back of his teeth and tasted resin and metal. He kept his eyes on Davi. He kept his hands open on the bench so he wouldn't close them on nothing when he needed them for something.

He waited for Davi's next move.

The branch above Davi flexed two degrees. The belts squealed under load. Davi's boot slid on the wet rib as he leaned.

Chapter 3

The Baler

Davi's boot lost purchase on the wet rib and slid. He caught himself on the frame and reset the hook into the jam. A high, continuous squeal cut under the motor as the belts polished under load, a pitch that made his jaw ache. Heat from the motor raised a low fog two feet off the slab. Resin hung in the shed with a metallic edge on the tongue that wouldn't clear.

Warren had already timed the flex of the branch above the baler against Davi's movements. The pattern held. When Davi leaned in, the branch lifted and took a fractional set toward him. When he eased back, it settled with a lag. Not wind. The open bay admitted snow in sheets; gusts drove grit across the floor and then stopped. Even in those still seconds, the branch retained the new angle.

"Hook only," Warren said. "Keep your chest off the throat."

Davi grinned without humor. "Got it." He leaned again, set the hook deeper, and pulled. The knot of laterals shifted. The trunk rolled a fraction and then stopped; something inside the throat applied a brake. The belts changed note to a lower band with a rough, uneven grind, gear teeth not seating clean.

A change ran through the near Titan's lateral. Not a whip from air, not a bounce from impact. The basal rotation tightened. The branch swept a short arc and made contact with Davi's jacket at the ribs. The fibers grabbed. Warren watched the fabric compress under a series of small constrictions that traveled along the branch from base to tip.

"Back out," Warren said. He didn't raise his voice. He didn't need to. Davi's head came up anyway at the tone.

“It’s fine,” Davi said, and tried to twist free. The branch cinched. It didn’t snag; it tightened in a pulse he could feel through the manufactured fleece. His torso shifted forward. The hook tore out of the jam. The sudden release swung his weight toward the feed. His hip struck the guard with a sound that didn’t belong to metal.

Warren moved and caught a handful of jacket between the shoulders. He planted his boots on a band of sand that hadn’t slicked yet. The fabric went hard in his grip as the branch contracted again. Force transmitted through the jacket in active increments, not as friction. He adjusted grip to avoid tearing a seam.

“Stop the feed,” he said.

Vince didn’t look. “Clear it.”

Maya’s hand hovered over the loader lever and then came off. A half-second later, under Vince’s stare, it went back on. She lifted the forks a few inches to take weight off the baler mouth. Nolan had drifted to the control panel during the jam, his palm inches from the red emergency mushroom, not touching.

The branch tightened. It coiled enough to fold fabric under Warren’s fists. He felt a small rotation through the bulk of Davi’s body. Davi’s boots scuffed for purchase on slush that gave way. The belts bit the trunk again and threw a grinding timbre as the end took. The mouth didn’t close; it advanced enough to bring pressure forward.

Maya stepped in and slammed the emergency stop with an open palm. The baler coughed through a last partial cycle and the belts drifted down to stillness, the rollers clacking as they settled. The motor spun for a beat and then stopped. The motor coasting reduced overall noise by a step; the belt squeal stopped first. With the baler stopped, wind sheared past the roll-up track, the loader’s idle carried, and breath sounded close.

The branch didn’t loosen. Davi’s body took another small rotation and the contact line at his ribs deepened. He made a sound that came from too far back in his throat. Warren pulled. The movement against his

hands felt wrong. It wasn't weight topped by a snag; it was a grip that changed in discrete pulses under his fingers, peristaltic and fast, each pulse followed by a holding phase.

"Cut it," Vince said. He had a utility knife in his hand. He went for fabric.

"Not the coat. The branch," Warren said. "At the base."

Vince swore and put the knife away because the branch base sat inside the feed where fingers had already vanished too often. He got a two-hand grip on Davi's upper arm. Then she dropped the forks two inches, as low as she could go without crushing fingers, and set the loader in park. She moved to Davi's side and hooked her hands into his belt from the back. Nolan latched onto denim at the knee.

"On three," Warren said. He counted under his breath anyway, not trusting anyone else's three. They pulled against something that yielded and then caught. The jacket flattened more over ribs that shouldn't change shape like that. Warren heard cartilage pop.

Davi didn't shout. Air went out of him in a wet rattle. The contact with the branch shifted from fabric to flesh. Needles punched through the jacket and into skin with the stubborn set of barbed tips. The line of punctures ran strip-like under Warren's hands and forward into the shadowed zone above the feed.

He let go of the jacket and got both palms on Davi's sternum and shoulder to counter-rotate him. Maya's pull added angle. Nolan's legs slid. Vince leaned his bodyweight into the grip. The branch cracked at some point along its length without freeing; it had a second tether inside the roll. Davi's chest compressed against the guard. Warren felt bones move as a unit in a way that meant they were no longer acting as a unit.

The belts were stopped but there was still energy in the system. The trunk shifted forward a few centimeters in the mouth and then jammed hard. The frame gave back a short, dense vibration through the steel. Warren saw air bubble red through resin on the cut face and break. The

smell that rose from it carried the same copper trace the aerosol had carried earlier but stronger, solvent pushed up under cut wood.

“Hit it again,” Vince said.

“It’s stopped,” Nolan said. His voice was thin. He had one hand on Davi’s ankle and one on the panel. “It’s already, ”

Maya lifted and then jerked back when the branch cinched a final notch. She swore once and set her thumbs against fabric under Warren’s hands. That leverage broke the hold. Davi came backward by inches. The branch let go at once, not by relaxing, but by letting the distal part shear free at his chest. The section that had wrapped him held curvature under load. It slapped back into the feed with a wet sound.

They went with the momentum and dragged Davi onto the slab. He hit on his side. One arm was pinned under his back; the other was bent against the slab at the elbow. His neck lay crooked and stayed that way. The puncture line across his chest ran from axilla to midline to the other axilla, a band of broken skin with resin and blood in it. The jacket tore open. Warren saw the wound edges move in a way that wasn’t only breathing.

He looked closer. The wound margin carried filaments, white and hair-thin, aligned in a tight, uniform strip along the cut. Several extended into the air. They moved. When a gust drove colder air in across the floor, several of the exposed ones retracted a few millimeters and curled. When his breath got close, a few extended 1, 2 millimeters toward the moisture.

“What the hell,” Maya said. She kept her voice too even. It was quieter than the loader idle.

Davi’s next breath rattled and then didn’t. He made a thin sound that was not breath, then no sound at all. The skin at his neck stayed flat. Warren put two fingers against the side of Davi’s throat and found nothing. Heat still radiated through the jacket to his wrist.

“Get him out,” Vince said. “Get him up. We have to, ” He cut the sentence off and replaced it. “We’re not leaving him on a floor. Get him inside.”

“Mess hall,” Warren said. He didn’t look up. He kept his eyes on the wound and the filament behavior. He pulled his hand back an inch and watched a pair extend. He moved his fingers closer and watched them orient. He changed the orientation of his hand and watched two twist. He was mapping without wanting to.

“Not the mess hall,” Vince said. “We’re not putting him on a damn table where people eat.” His words came fast and flat. He kept his gaze off the wound.

Maya had her hands under Davi’s shoulders. “Where else?” Her question didn’t carry heat. It had only the world available in it.

Vince blew out. “Fine. Mess hall. But we do it fast and then we get back here. I’m not filing a comp claim because you people want to stand around examining him.” He glanced at Warren. “You’re not a doctor.”

“No,” Warren said. “I’m the only one here who’s studied living tissue under a lens for thirty years.” He slid his hands to take weight. The resin at the wound had a sharp solvent front that made his eyes water.

They lifted. Nolan put his hands on Davi’s calves because that’s what was left to lift. The door admitted a hard band of snow that drove into their knees and then passed. Beyond the bay, the nearest rows set their laterals toward the bunkhouse roof and toward the shed mouth, steady and one degree tighter than ten minutes ago.

They crossed the yard in a staggered line, bent over their load. Slab grit and snow made a slurry that grabbed at soles. The wind’s vector sat steady enough to plan steps between harder bands. Warren kept his eyes on his hands and the wound he could see in the space between them. He marked filament motion with the changes in air hitting the wound as they turned.

Inside the mess hall, the heater's blower ran. Warm air rose along the wall the duct fed and the roof snow shed along that line. The mounted magnifier sat on the end of a long table with coffee rings burned into its varnish. A string of paper cutouts drooped from a staple line along a shelf. The power strip at the wall hummed quietly under the generator's rhythm.

"Here," Warren said. They set Davi on the table. The wood flexed and creaked under the weight. At the wall switch, he flipped the magnifier lamp on and got a rectangle of white light that washed the wound. He stripped his gloves, then pulled on a pair from the first aid box because the cold had made his hands slow. He flexed them to make sure the tremor stayed inside and not in his fingers.

Vince hovered by the doorway, as if someone had to stand between this and the rest of the building. "We don't do this." He rubbed at his jaw. He looked at the clock on the wall and then at his wrist where a dead watch lay under his coat. He checked it anyway out of habit. He turned his head. "Don't show me that," he said, and kept to the door.

"We do this," Warren said. "We need to know what the branch did."

Maya rolled her shoulders and then let them hang. Her beanie had stripes of compacted snow. "He got wrapped," she said. "A strap." She looked at Warren, and at the wound under light.

Nolan made half of a sound and then moved to the corner by the vending machine. He kept his eyes on his boots. He knocked his shoulders into the plastic front and didn't seem to notice he had done it. No one else had come in from the shed; it was just the four of them.

At the cabinet, he opened it. A wrapped kit of cheap cutlery and a box of nitrile gloves sat behind plastic mugs. From the shelf he took a paring knife and a stainless spoon because they would do. The flare he had pocketed from the shed went on the counter; he pushed it back until it was out of the way.

Gloved hand flat to his sternum, he felt the zip ridge of the sample bag. The bag came out and went on the table beside Davi's arm. Moisture beads had gathered inside where the white root tip had traced and retraced along the polyethylene. Inside the sealed bag, the tip had flattened along one side and left a faint smear track.

"What's that?" Vince asked.

"A root tip from the dock," Warren said. "It moved independent of the plant."

"Jesus Christ." Vince turned away and then back. "We don't keep trash on the table with a," He stopped at the word and let his hand flick in a direction that meant the body. He closed his mouth.

The magnifier went over the wound. Angle adjusted, light down until the glare washed out the surface sheen and left the structures on the margin in relief. Knife in his right hand, spoon in his left. Working slow helped in the cold.

The first cut into the margin didn't bleed as much as it should have at that width. Resin mixed with blood into a thin slurry that ran and then thickened; it didn't set like sap. The spoon separated layers without tearing. Under the skin and superficial fascia, where he would have expected fat and connective tissue to dominate, he found embedded white threads aligned in vectors that followed the course of vessels.

Under the lens, the fibers were hair-thin. Several had a glassy surface. In the light, alternating bands showed along their length and then vanished when he changed angle. Air slipped out of him without meaning to. Several lifted toward the warmth and the humidity in his breath. Lips sealed, he breathed through his nose and watched them settle again when the air cooled.

"What are you doing?" Vince said.

"Looking," Warren said. He didn't move his eyes off the field.

With tweezers from the first aid kit, he isolated a single filament with a point. The tip adhered to the tweezers without surface tension to account for it. He lifted; the filament came up two millimeters and then contracted against the tweezers with a ripple that ran along its length. He felt the tiny resistance through the metal. Repositioning, he pulled it onto the wound surface. It coiled once and then extended again, oriented now toward the closest source of moisture, which was the cut surface itself.

“Stop poking him,” Nolan said from the corner. His voice shook. The words came out too loud in the warm room.

“I’m not hurting him,” Warren said. He kept his voice level. “He’s dead.” He forced the words out; his diaphragm tightened. He moved anyway. He drew the filament across cool metal. It retracted from the cooler surface. He moved it toward the tip of his glove. It extended toward the residual moisture there, then retracted when he removed his hand. He counted a lag.

“What is it?” Maya asked. She leaned down to see the field without her breath going in.

“Not a root hair,” Warren said. “Root hairs don’t do this at this temperature. They don’t do this, period. They don’t contract.” He slid the magnifier aside, put the filament back, and adjusted for a different angle of light. Under higher magnification, he saw cilia-form projections along one segment. They beat in a coordinated pattern. The beat increased when he moved the light source closer by two inches. Lamp moved back; the beat slowed.

“Say it in English,” Vince said. He stood at Warren’s shoulder now. His breath smelled of coffee that had been burned hours ago.

“Motile fibers,” Warren said. “Nematode interface behavior. Contractile proteins where they shouldn’t be. Embedded along vessels. You’re looking at plant tissue behaving as an animal system would. It’s following heat and moisture gradients.”

“You’re telling me a branch reached out and took him. That’s what you’re saying,” Vince said.

“I’m saying the branch responded to his heat and movement with active constriction,” Warren said. “Under stimulus, the fibers contract and orient. They’re distributed along the cambium and into new growth, then into any tissue they can enter. They entered him along the puncture line. They don’t need a vascular connection to move. Your baler didn’t take him first.”

“It’s the baler,” Vince said. He jabbed his finger toward the shed even though the wall was between them and the machine. “You don’t clear it, it takes you. He went inside the line. It took him. End.”

Warren tuned him out long enough to take the sealed sample bag and position it under the light. The white tip inside had pressed a smear into the plastic. He rotated the bag so the filament tip faced the light. It tracked along the zip in small, discrete moves. It turned toward the magnifier lamp’s heat. Lamp moved away and the tip slowed. Lamp returned and the tip oriented. It wasn’t fast. It didn’t need to be.

“This isn’t inert wood,” he said. “This was engineered. Aggressive foraging behavior. Seeking moisture and heat. A nematode gene integration would do it. Directional mobility at the tip, contractility along the axis. That’s what we’re seeing.”

“You don’t know that,” Vince said. “You’re guessing.”

“I don’t have a gel rig or a scope that can resolve what I want, so yes,” Warren said. “But the behavior matches. You don’t get contraction like that in conifer tissue at this temperature without added machinery. You don’t get cilia-form movement without genes built to do that. You don’t get this orientation to a heat source unless the system can map a gradient.” He heard his own cadence and wanted to say it simpler. “They go to heat and water. They go to movement that couples into the substrate.”

Maya’s throat worked. “So?”

“So we drop the setpoint and stop moving except when we have to,” Warren said. “Stillness and heat discipline. Movement and warmth draw them. We reduce both or we broadcast our position all night.” He gestured at the heater vent. “That plume lines up the near rows. You saw it. I saw it. Every time the blower kicks, their branch angles adjust. We make our signature smaller.”

“No,” Vince said. “We’re not freezing to death because you want to play lab. We shut this door, we’re fine. We clean the throat and restart the line. We’re not turning this into,” He didn’t finish it.

Nolan swallowed and spoke without looking up. “I don’t want to be here. I’m going back to the bunkhouse.” He moved toward the hallway with his shoulders high.

“Hold up,” Maya said. “If this is real, you don’t want to be near the heater.”

“They’re trees,” Nolan said, but he said the word without inflection now. He went into the hallway and leaned on the doorframe to the bunkroom instead of crossing. He pressed his forehead to the wood and stayed there.

Magnifier returned to the wound, one more small opening along the margin. The spoon retracted and showed the fibers tethered along a vessel line. He followed it three centimeters. At a branch point inside the tissue, the fibers densified. The bundle lay against a vein. He didn’t chase it deeper. Tweezers held, he watched to see if any motion traveled along the bundle. A slow ripple did, away from his glove and toward the wound’s interior where warmth remained.

Snow hit the mess hall windows in a fresh blast. The heater’s click carried through the wall, relay to blower. Air moved out of the high registers and across the ceiling. On the far side of the wall, above the roof, warm air exited into night and made a vapor line that a person could see from the yard when bands cleared. Warren listened to the blower’s pitch and counted the cycle.

“We make ourselves colder and quieter or more of us die.” He met Vince’s eyes over the rim of the magnifier. “That’s not a guess.”

Vince’s face pinched. “We keep eighty people warm on a normal week with that setpoint. You don’t know what happens if we drop it in a storm with wet clothes. Hypothermia. Field manual says two hours. You want that on you?”

“I want them not to map us,” Warren said. “You have an engine in a shack; you have a flue; you have bodies. You hear the creak out there. You saw the aisles narrow when we gathered at the shed. That wasn’t wind. You’ve run this yard long enough to know what wind does and what it doesn’t.”

Maya rubbed a streak of blood and resin off her glove onto the edge of the table, then stopped and held her hands out like she could see something on them she didn’t want to keep. “We drop it three degrees,” she said to Vince. “Not five. Three. We don’t go outside unless we have to. We don’t stand over vents. We don’t run the loader unless we have to.”

Vince bared his teeth with no humor. “Three,” he said. He left the doorway and went to the thermostat. He put a finger on the down arrow and pressed it three times. The display went from 68 to 65. At the register, airflow eased; the next relay click lagged a few beats longer than the prior cycle.

“We don’t go,” Warren said. “We stop moving. We stay away from the vents and exterior walls. We don’t clump in doorways. If you’re cold, you get blankets. You turn your body into a smaller signature. Don’t stand. Sit. Don’t stomp your feet. Count your breaths if you have to. Cadence matters.” The words were out before he could think about the part of him that wanted to take them back. He had taught people how to move through greenhouses under similar constraints when a contamination flagged and they had to keep air still.

Maya breathed out. “Stillness and heat discipline.” She tried the phrase out and it came out without wobble.

Vince's hands stayed on the thermostat like it needed guarding. He squeezed the sides of the plastic and let go. "You two stay. I'm going to check the shed." He turned toward the hallway.

"If you go outside and stand in that doorway alone, you're a beacon," Warren said. "Don't go alone. Don't go now."

Vince looked like he was about to spit on the floor. He didn't. "You keep talking like that and people panic. We're fine. We're inside. It's a storm and a bad night." His voice didn't find a new pattern. It stayed flat.

Nolan lifted his head from the doorframe. "I can't hear the generator from here." He was wrong; the hum was under everything if you knew how to separate it. But his ears were full of other sounds now, and he had never learned to listen for load. He rubbed the heel of his hand against his sternum.

"You can," Warren said. He didn't move toward Nolan. He kept his body still, the way he had told everyone to be. "You're hearing other things louder."

Maya moved to the sink and ran water to clean the knife and the spoon. She stopped after a second and shut it off. She put both tools on a towel and folded the towel over the tools to cover the metal. She took a bottle of rubbing alcohol from the cabinet and poured a line over the towel until it soaked and then she left it there.

"Blankets," she said to Nolan without turning. He didn't move. She turned. "Nolan. Blankets." Her voice stayed level. The kid moved down the hall and opened the storage closet. He stood staring at the shelves for a long beat, then took two wool blankets and came back. He set one near the table and kept one in his arms.

Warren kept his hands on the table edge until he felt the tremor in them leave. He looked at Davi's face without holding breath. It wasn't a face he'd ever seen except at a job. The lines in it had been made by wind and squinting at sunlight off snow and work that made someone hold their mouth in a certain way so grit didn't get in. That didn't help

anything he had to do now.

“We cover him,” he said. Maya pulled the blanket over Davi to the shoulders and smoothed it once. She tucked a corner in by habit.

Someone’s boot scuffed the floor. No one spoke. The heater clicked off. The blower spun down; the low hum under the wind stopped. Quiet let other sound carry: a creak from the wall that faced the planted blocks, the whirl of a fan in the vending machine, Nolan’s breath pulling rough through his mouth in the doorway.

“You said they go to movement that couples into the ground,” Maya said. “You mean vibrations.”

“Yes,” Warren said. “Footfalls. Motors. Any periodic signal transmitted through the slab or soil. Pressure waves in air can matter too, but the substrate matters more. A motor couples better than we do. So does a hot flue.” He kept his sentences short because naming too much wasn’t going to help anyone who didn’t already know the words.

Vince rolled his shoulders and loosened his arms. “I’m going to see the shed,” he said again, and then he didn’t move. He looked toward the door and then at the thermostat and then at the table and then at the door again. The sequence stopped on the table. His jaw moved once. He stepped backward instead of forward and hit the wall with his shoulder. He steadied himself and didn’t look to see if anyone had seen him do it.

The heater clicked on. Air moved through the duct. On the roof, snow slumped along the vent line and slid. The sound came down through the wall studs as a soft rush. Warren didn’t need the window to know that in the planted ten meters from the wall the nearest rows would be adjusting again. He pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth to stop words from coming that would not help.

“Three holds,” Maya said. She rubbed her hands briskly for an instant and then stopped herself. She stuffed them in her armpits instead.

“Where do you want me?” Nolan asked, voice small and eager to be acceptable.

“Sit,” Warren said. “There. Away from the vent. Don’t bounce your leg. Don’t tap.” He took the flare off the counter and put it in his pocket again. It pressed against his thigh, hard.

Vince’s eyes found the pocket and then left it. He scrubbed his face with both hands. “We call this in,” he said, but without purpose. No cell service here, and the road was buried.

“We can try landline,” Maya said. “If the lines are still up between here and the junction.”

“Later,” Vince said. The word sat with no plan on it.

After a last glance, he put the sample bag back under his sweater because cold would change the behavior and he wanted it inside a range that kept signal without freezing.

He put his hands on the table edge again and felt the grain under the gloves. He had told people the rule. He had said it out loud. He knew what that meant. He knew what it had meant the last time he had been the one in a room to say the words; the alarm tone from that day still mapped over this one.

Beyond the wall, something moved in the pattern of wood against wood. Not groaning. A friction sound produced when one surface shifted against another in small steps. It came, then stopped.

Maya watched the vent. “That three’s not going to be enough if we keep running motors.”

“I know,” Warren said. He didn’t plan out loud. He didn’t set a time. He didn’t name the generator. He held still and counted under his breath. He stopped at ten and started again.

No one slept. The room cooled and then held at the new setpoint. The next cycle told him the change: the blower stayed off for about eighty seconds between runs, up from roughly forty-five before the adjustment.

Fine pellets scraped softly at the glass in bursts and then settled into a steadier rush.

Warren looked once more at the blanket line and then away. He let the rules sit in his head where they needed to sit: stillness, heat discipline, change only one variable at a time. He had more to say and none of it would help if he said it now.

The mess hall light flickered once on a load shift and steadied. All of them looked up.

Vince didn't answer. He stared toward where the shed sat beyond the wall. He looked down at his empty hands and flexed them. The heater hummed. The wind knocked snow into the window and it stuck for a second and then slid. The generator's rhythm stayed even under the rest of it.

Warren let his shoulders drop. His knee flexed; then he locked it again. He stood still instead. He let his breath run lower and slower. He decided if someone stood up fast he would say something, and if they didn't, he would not.

The heater clicked through another cycle. Then another. The heater clicked off. The air above the tables stayed warmer than the doorway; breath fog thinned near the heater. From the planted ten meters beyond the wall came a single wood-on-wood scrape, thin and dry.

Chapter 4

Taxonomy

The heater relay clicked and the blower noise died. Warm air lifted off the tables and then thinned. The mess hall air lost a degree at the skin before anyone spoke. Snow hit the window hard enough to stick for one second and then cleared. The generator hum came through the floor as a steady pulse beneath other sounds.

Warren stood with his hands braced on the table near Davi's covered shoulder. The wool blanket rose and fell a millimeter when the door down the hall opened and closed. It was the draft, not a breath. Workers came in from the bunkroom and stopped at the threshold. He kept his gaze off the blanket's edge and on the magnifier where the root tip had smeared the plastic. He had said the rule already. He said it again because saying it once didn't change people who were scared in the wrong direction.

"Heat and vibration draw," he said. "Stillness and cold shrink what we look like." His voice stayed low to keep air movement down. "We keep the setpoint where it is. We don't stomp. We don't pace. We get small. We wait for their signal to move away from us instead of toward us."

A sawyer by the coffee urn said, "Short blasts? Ten seconds?"

One of the hands by the door said, "Cycle the thermostat, quick heat?"

"No," Warren said. "Bursts make a sharper target."

Nolan had the blanket he hadn't used clamped in his arms. He hugged it tighter but didn't wrap it around himself. He kept his eyes on the towel-covered knife and spoon. His lip had a white line where he had chewed it. When he breathed through his mouth the sound carried to the

window and made a faint fog that vanished at half-arm's length.

Maya stood near the sink, back to the exterior wall, hands under her armpits to keep them from doing what hands wanted to do when there was too much adrenaline and not enough distance. "What about timing?" she asked. "On and off. The blower. We can step when it's off."

"Off-cycle's around eighty seconds now," Warren said. "Longer if we don't add load anywhere else. We move in the off-window if we have to move. We stop before it clicks back on. It's not just the air. The fan motor transmits through the wall studs and slab. It's a periodic source. They map that."

Vince's boots thumped once in the doorway and then went still. He rubbed his jaw, skin roughened from hours of cold air. "This is bullshit," he said softly; the sound stayed in the room. Then he lifted his head. "We are not turning this into a freeze camp."

Warren didn't look at him. "We're making ourselves less visible to the thing that killed him," he said, and only then let his eyes flick to the blanket for half a second.

He pulled the sealed bag closer with two fingers. The plastic had condensed tiny beads along the smear track where the root tip had traced and retraced. He adjusted the magnifier lamp closer by a notch and watched the tip adjust its alignment inside the bag by a fraction of a centimeter.

"Watch," he said. He held the bag one hand-span below his face. Lips pursed, he exhaled once, controlled, under the magnifier's rectangle of light. Moisture loaded the air. The tip inside the bag tracked that small gradient. It didn't leap. It didn't need to. It oriented, moved several millimeters, and then paused at the limits of the bag seam.

Nolan flinched hard. "Don't," He stopped. "I don't like that."

Maya was closer, but she kept her chin tucked to keep breath out of the field. "Two seconds of breath and it moves. So how long for a flare?"

“Depends on range,” Warren said. “In air this cold, a flare set far enough away gives you seconds, not minutes. Heat falls fast by distance. But in substrate, they propagate along roots faster than air. The generator’s worse than a flare. Constant, deep coupling.”

“Can we pulse?” Maya asked. “Run the heat hard for ten seconds every five minutes? Keep pipes alive without a continuous plume?”

“Pulses are signatures,” Warren said. “A spike is a sharper gradient. They’ll orient to the spike. The first spike is enough. Especially this close.” He put the bag back on the table and slid it away from the blanket.

The lights flickered. The power strip hum under the coffee shelf changed and steadied. The heater did not come back on. The air in the room cooled another fraction nobody needed a thermometer to confirm. The relay clicked; the blower stayed down. Low voltage. The generator’s hum didn’t change. Vince swore under his breath and pushed off the jamb hard enough to scuff the floor. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about,” he said. Louder now. “We lose heat, we lose the line, we crack a pipe and this building’s a freezer. Somebody goes and restarts the genset.” He pointed down the hall. “Pipes first.”

“The genset is running,” Warren said. “You heard the hum.”

“It’s not carrying load like it should,” Vince said. “Lights don’t flicker if it’s healthy.” He jabbed a finger at Nolan. “You. With me. You know where the panel is.”

Nolan took one step and then looked at Warren like there might be a third option he could be told that didn’t make him fall apart worse. Warren kept his voice low and even. That steadied people sometimes when the content couldn’t. “If you go, you go slow. You breathe into your collar. You move when the blower is off. You keep space between you and anything that stands warmer than snow.”

“We’re not doing that,” Vince said. “We’re keeping this place from turning into a morgue.” He pointed again. “Move.”

Maya's jaw set. "Short bursts," she said to Warren, still on the problem. "Say we need to. Ten seconds of heat buys what?"

"It creates a sharp target," Warren said. "Better not to make one. Ten seconds is a lot of time for something this close." He cut the detail. "A short burst is still a lure."

"We can't just sit here," Vince said, voice flat and hard. "In these clothes at this temperature, fingers go numb in minutes and thinking slows. Two hours in wet clothes and people start to go bad. Hands go dumb. That's not theoretical. You want that on you?"

"Stillness buys us time," Warren said. "Everything that makes us obvious burns that time. The generator, the flue, footsteps. That's the list tonight." He framed it in lists because lists made some people hold still.

"We're not going to freeze," Vince said. "We are going to be warm enough to think. Nolan."

The boy had moved to the door already. The pointing moved him faster than the caution. He looked like he wanted to put his blanket back on the shelf to be tidy about it and then didn't, which was a better decision than the tidy one. He didn't wrap the blanket around himself because something of Warren's instruction had landed. He kept his arms closed and pushed the fabric against his ribs to keep the air from moving.

"Off-cycle's running," Warren said. "Go now if you're going."

Nolan went. He moved with a checked cadence, then forced it slower. His boots set down and picked up without scuffing. He reached the end of the hall and the exterior door. Cold entered and the warm ceiling layer thinned. He went through.

Vince stared at Warren like he'd lost the argument and won something else by refusing to admit it. "You keep them calm," he said. He didn't wait for a thing back. He started after Nolan, then stopped in the hall, rigid.

The heater clicked and did not start. The blower sat dead. Warren watched the thermostat display hold at 65. The power strip hum kept its pitch. The generator's hum in the slab stayed steady. Whatever had flickered wasn't total.

Maya's attention stayed on the bag under the magnifier. "Flares," she said. "If we need to pull them off someone, can we throw heat somewhere else and buy seconds?"

"Maybe," Warren said. "Throw it farther than you want to and sooner than you think you should. You want the gradient over there, not almost over there. If you wait until it's at you, the best move is to be colder than the thing you're moving toward." He realized he was talking like a manual and shut his mouth.

She nodded once. She had changed position without thinking about it; she was farther from the vent register now. She had pushed her beanie down to cover one ear that had gone white around the rim.

Gusts struck the glass at a new angle. Snow accumulated along the lower sash and then slid. The room lost another fraction of degree. Nobody moved for the blankets. Warren kept counting under his breath and stopped when he realized he'd let his voice leak enough to move air.

"Scope," he said. "Loader cab."

Maya's eyes shifted. "Under the seat. In a green case," she said. "Monocular. Takes a second to wake."

"I'll get it." He didn't want her moving. He didn't want to move himself. He slipped the flare from the counter into his pocket. The bag with the root tip went back under his sweater to keep it in a band where behavior stayed readable and not frozen. Down the hall, he moved.

He kept his steps quiet and timed the turn into the shed entry with the heater's continued off state. At the roll-up door, a drift filled the lip; he stepped over. Cold hit his face and he kept his mouth closed. The loader sat where Maya had left it, forks low. He climbed the rung, opened

the cab, and slid the case out from under the seat. The plastic was cold enough to stick to a wet glove, so he kept it moving, tucked it under his jacket zipper line, and walked back.

In the mess hall again, he set the case on the table and unlatched it. The thermal scope was old enough to have a battery door with tape on it to keep it from flexing open. The tape held. He pressed the power. The display came up slow and blue-black at first and then mapped to its palette. He breathed slow to keep fog off the eyepiece and went to the window.

“Angle?” Maya asked.

“I’ve got the shack,” he said. He raised the monocular and blinked twice to moisten his eye. The field filled in grainy and then steadied. On the display, cold surfaces read dark; warmer read bright. Nolan came into frame from the right as a brighter shape than anything around him. He was still in the near yard, halfway between the mess hall and the generator shack. He was moving slower than a person who didn’t know about being watched by a thing that didn’t have eyes. That was good.

“See him?” Maya asked.

“Yeah.” Warren kept the monocular still. “He’s clean. Nothing near him.”

The planted blocks were dim, almost the same as background, except where the nearest rows had leaned in close to the shed and taken retained warmth into their outer layers. Those were a degree up, enough to show as a duller gray against black. Farther down, around the generator shack, the field changed. The building was hot. Snow on its roof read above ambient, and the door seam showed brighter than the wall. The trunks around it registered higher than the field too. They were not as bright as the shack, but they weren’t background either. The trunks nearest the shack brightened a fraction, consistent with conduction and convection. There was a bulge of warmer signal tight to the building.

“They’re concentrating there,” Warren said. “Local maximum around the engine. They’re already there.” He meant heat physics and movement along live tissue lines.

Nolan stepped into the last twenty yards. The wind shifted and pushed cold across the frame. The monocular auto-adjusted and then held. Nolan checked his feet and corrected. He put his hand on the door handle and stopped. He froze mid-reach and waited.

“Don’t open it all the way,” Maya said under her breath. “Just enough.”

“He can’t hear you,” Warren said, reflexive, then hated the reflex. Nolan pulled the door. The display saturated white for half a second, then recovered to normal contrast.

“Nolan,” Maya said. It came out tight and flat.

The boy’s heat form was there and then it wasn’t. When the glare cleared, a hot shape held near the engine block. It was small and compact, too regular, too round for a torso. The human outline didn’t move away. It went down into a point that stayed bright.

“His signature’s dropping weird,” Warren said. He swallowed against a sour rise in his throat. “Not moving away. Concentrating.”

“Covering him. Insulation,” Maya said. Not a question.

“Yes,” Warren said. He dropped the monocular for a second and closed his eyes without planning to, then raised it again. The bright core by the engine didn’t change shape. Nothing else moved big in the field. Movement here wasn’t going to look like a sprint.

“We can’t leave him,” Maya said. Her hands tightened on the back of a chair.

“No,” Warren said. He didn’t allow the part of his brain that wanted to rehearse what had happened in a different building a lifetime ago to speak. He kept the monocular up and looked for any shadow or movement pattern he could use. The heater in the mess hall stayed off.

That was one thing in their column.

“We go,” Maya said. “With your rules.”

He lowered the monocular and handed it to her. “Watch for a minute more,” he said. “I need to see if the bag’s tip cools down tucked in. I need it alive for later.” He didn’t. He needed his hands to not shake when he picked up the flares.

She took the scope and held it steadier than he had. “The bright core’s holding,” she said. “Everything else is colder than we want.”

“Good,” he said. He didn’t mean it. He meant it was not worse in a way he didn’t have words for yet.

He moved to the counter, took the second flare from the emergency kit, and slid it into his other pocket. The striker tape on the kit cover stretched and didn’t tear; he didn’t need it now. He picked up a short pry bar from under the sink where someone had left it months ago as a lever to fix the vending machine when it jammed. The bar had a chill in it that ran into his palm. He wrapped his glove tighter.

Maya lowered the monocular and handed it back. “Tell me the steps,” she said.

“Single file. I’ll go first,” he said. “Five meters between us. We move on the heater off-window. When it clicks on, we freeze. Breath goes inside collars. Mouths closed. Eyes up but don’t full scan. Feet clear with a lift, not a scrape. If you feel vibration in the slab that wasn’t there a second before, you stop and let it pass.”

“And if it doesn’t pass?”

“Flares downrange.” He tapped his pocket. “Throw farther than feels intuitive. Throw into an alley they can fill without crossing us. Movement’s on their side after that.”

“You’re sure this works?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “It fits what we know. It’s the least bad option.” He let the science stay there: gradients, coupling, duty cycles. No one needed enzymes named right now.

She nodded. She pulled her collar up high and zipped her coveralls to the line where heat escaped fastest. She grabbed the chainsaw from its hang on the shed-side door where it had stayed since the shift. She didn’t pull the cord. The chain looked clean and ready. Cold.

They hit the hallway at the same time that Vince came back inside. He blocked the corridor, broad in that bulky jacket, blocking the space.

“Where,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

“Generator,” Maya said. “Nolan’s not moving.”

“You’re not taking my gear for that.” He smacked the saw body with his palm. “Set it down.”

“We’re not starting it,” she said. “Cold metal. We carry it for when we have to cut something off someone.”

“You don’t know anything about cutting anything off those trees,” Vince said. “You got one of us killed with your stop-and-go. We do this my way.” His face held the flush of wind and a tight jaw.

“We aren’t arguing,” Warren said. “We’re going.”

Vince stepped into Warren’s space, close. Warren didn’t back up. He had no interest in a posture fight. “You go out there without my say, no company gear,” Vince said. “We’re not eating liability because two people ran into a whiteout.”

He turned his head toward the tool cage. “Lock it.”

A grader operator near the wall took the key off its peg and snapped the padlock through the hasp. A second man, a sawyer with a gray beanie, stepped in front of the mesh and set his boots wide, guarding the door with a hand on the wire. Two men clustered with Vince at the cage; three stayed by the table with collars up, watching the scope.

Warren didn't try the cage. He didn't need anything in it. He held the pry bar and the flares and that had to be enough. He made eye contact with Maya and didn't make it a moment about trust because they already had the amount available and looking wouldn't add any more.

"Move," she said through clenched teeth. That was for Vince and not for Warren. She put the saw on her shoulder with the bar pointing away from her face so it wouldn't gouge the doorframe.

Vince put a palm against the saw body again, trying to stop action with friction. Maya stepped around him, her shoulder brushing his jacket.

"You walk out that door, I'm not authorizing a pull-out," Vince said to their backs. The words came out too fast at the end, breath uneven.

Warren did not turn. He set two fingers to the wall seam until the tremor in them steadied. "Nature isn't cruel," he said, not to fight the man. "It's consequential." He had said that sentence in rooms with whiteboards and in rooms with dirt floors and at least one morgue. He didn't wait for a response.

He unlatched the door. A sheet of cold air dropped to ankle height and slid along the floor. Zippers rasped as they sealed their collars. They stepped out on the heater's off-window, counting the seconds to the next click.

Chapter 5

The Green Chain

They stepped into the yard together and then apart by the measure he had set in his head. Five meters between their bodies, not by guess but by the span he knew from the loader's fork width and the length of the mess hall's long table. He ran the heater relay count: eighty seconds off if no one added load. The relay had clicked to off as they opened the door. That gave him a window.

Maya tucked her mouth into her collar and kept the saw against her shoulder with the bar pointed away from her face. Mouth closed, he let his breath leak along his collarbone to avoid plumes that would hang in cold air. The snow came in grains against nose and cheekbones and then sheets when a band came through. Wind shear moved it at an angle that changed every dozen steps. The slab under the drifted yard transmitted a steady low hum from the generator shack and a fainter one from the mess hall power strip. He set his feet down clean and lifted without scraping, placing each boot flat on the ice ribs.

They moved in single file through the near alley of the planted rows, Warren first, Maya behind, five meters back. Laterals along the nearest trunks had held a bearing toward the mess hall flue and the shed mouth earlier. Now those same laterals canted by a measurable degree toward the heat bulge that the generator made behind its wall. He retained the last scope frame: brighter around the engine casing, warmer trunks near the shack. The alley had narrowed since the last look at the window. Each trunk's basal rotation tightened by small amounts when the heater in the mess hall clicked on and relaxed a fraction when it clicked off. He used the off window and kept their weight in that silence.

He knew when to throw the flare. Not near the shack, not close enough to backlight them. He wanted a new maximum away from their line of travel, placed early enough that the nearest rows would reorient there while he and Maya were still in the gap. Palming the flare, he felt the paper and lacquer, and kept his glove dry on the striker. Not until his count hit the middle of the off window did he peel the tape; then he snapped the cap, scraped, and a red-white core took. He bent his arm and threw at a forty-degree angle into an empty alley three rows over, farther than his cold-stiff shoulder could reliably throw.

The flare hit the snow and hissed. Heat vaporized a saucer around it; sparks lifted and fell; smoke streamed downwind in a narrow band. The noise was a narrow hiss, but the heat output was not small. Needles in the three nearest trunks on that alley changed orientation first. Basal sections rotated left a fraction of a degree. Lateral tiers on those trunks lifted along their warm-facing sides, and the arc of their tips shifted to the flare. Next row followed. The shift traveled by rows away from him and created the path he had wanted without opening the way he had come.

“Go,” he said, voice low. He used only that one word and moved.

Maya moved. Her steps matched his cadence, and they crossed the distance that had read as twenty-six paces to him at this spacing earlier through the window. Snow hit their faces as grains and then eased; a gust line passed and left a pocket where sound carried farther. The generator held a steady tone there through slab and air. The flare’s output fell to a duller burn after the first half-minute, but the trunks oriented enough to offer a margin.

At the shack door he stopped and put his palm on the cold handle. He listened through the steel. The engine inside produced a consistent rhythm. No new frequency sat on top of it. He looked left and right along the wall for white lines at the base seam. Snow had packed hard against the sill. No root tips showed in the drift at the threshold. He kept his hand on the handle long enough to let his tremor go through the steel instead of parceling it into air. Then he opened and stepped through.

The warm air hit his face at once. Not hot, but above ambient. Refractive ripples were visible above the engine housing where the heat from the casing distorted the air. Diesel odor overrode resin in a way that he had long ago mapped to coils and unburnt fractions. The engine block radiated. Its outer casing read as the same dull metal, but warmth was visible above it, and the frost that had formed along the seams of the shack had softened into a slick band near the engine and stayed frost farther out. A fine fog hung at about knee height from breath and vapor; it moved when they did and settled when they stopped.

Nolan was there against the engine. Not standing. He had been pulled in a curl, torso and one shoulder pressed to the casing, head turned away from the room at a bad angle for the neck. White filaments webbed his jacket, neck, and the exposed skin at the throat where his collar had opened when he had worked the latch. The filaments were not spider-silk fine; they were thicker than that by a step. Hair-thin at the smallest, but braided into cable mats along the ribs, those mats joined to thicker white root segments that disappeared into seams at the floor and a gap around a conduit. The mats pulsed in a fast, short contraction and hold sequence: a tense, then a fraction of relax, then a new tense. The cycle rate increased when he and Maya exhaled in the now-warm air, and it slowed when they both clamped down on breath.

Nolan's eyes were open. Fine crystals along the lashes. The pupils looked straight ahead at the inside of the casing where there was nothing to focus on. The chest moved by a few millimeters and then held. The movement did not coordinate with air at the mouth or nose. It matched the filament pulse timing where the mats ran over the ribs. On the next contraction the index finger of his left hand tapped the casing once, out of sync with any breath.

"Don't start it yet," Warren said to Maya without looking away. He set the pry bar on the floor where it would not vibrate against anything and moved in a short arc to Nolan's far side to see the contact points. He could hear Maya's breath change and then settle as she adjusted. "Keep it

cold until the last second. Noise and heat mark us.”

She nodded. He saw the angle of her jaw under the collar and the saw balanced across her shoulder. Her knuckles were white around the handle but her posture was still efficient. Ready but not moving.

He leaned in. A filament at Nolan’s clavicle extended toward the warmth of his exposed wrist where his glove had ridden up a centimeter. The tip lifted and oriented to that skin. Pulling back, he rolled his sleeve to close the gap in one motion and re-anchored his elbows against his ribs so his shoulders would not transmit a tremor into the filaments as a pressure wave. “They’re on gradient,” he said. “They move along the temperature gradient. Stay cooler than what you’re touching.”

Maya shifted a half step to the side to keep her body out of the engine’s direct convection and get a better angle on the big root that fed the mat over Nolan’s ribs. That one was finger-thick and ran under the jacket through the armpit. The jacket fabric had hardened with a thin sheen where sap and blood had mixed and cooled.

“We cut there,” she said, voice small inside her collar. “Base of the mat.”

“We cut there,” he agreed. “But we cut in this order: distal mats first so they don’t yank a gap when the main goes slack. Start with the ones under his ribs I can reach with hand pull while you cut. When I say stop, stop.” He kept the command short. He felt his words stir the air and sealed his lips again.

He placed his gloved fingertips at two filament mats where they entered Nolan’s jacket at the midaxillary line. The mats stuck to the glove palm on contact; a set of fine projections along their surfaces contacted the glove and then oriented toward the glove seam where moisture wicked under pressure. He lifted. The mat resisted and then released with a wet tearing sound that came from the interface between fabric and skin. Under it, Nolan’s skin had blistered in an oval segment that matched the mat’s footprint. Clear fluid had pooled where dermis had separated from

epidermis. The blister had a red margin where vessels had engorged or ruptured.

“Ready,” Maya said. “Say when.”

“Count after the click,” he said. “Relay off in three. Two.” He paused. The heater relay did not carry into this room, but he had the rhythm of it by now. He did not need the click to know the window.

“Now,” he said.

She crouched and set the saw’s bar at the first bundle he had marked, the one close to the floor where the mat ran into a thicker segment by the conduit gap. She did not start yet. She waited for the breath to leave her lungs and for her hands to steady on the handle. She adjusted the choke with a gloved thumb without looking down, set the saw on the floor for one moment to stabilize the pull, then stood it again with the bar at the ready.

“Now,” he said again. “Make it fast.”

She pulled the cord. The engine failed to catch on the first pull, half-caught on the second, then started. The saw jumped in her hands and then settled as the chain spun free and then slowed against the load of air. The sound rebounded off the metal walls; frost and dust on the surfaces scattered it. It still went into the wall studs and down into the sill and into the ground by a direct path. The vibration reached his molars, a high frequency superimposed on a lower hum.

The filament mats over Nolan’s ribs tightened. The contraction rate increased by a notch, then two. The mat under Warren’s fingers shortened by a centimeter and pulled his glove. He kept his grip and pulled back with steady force and did not allow the mat to ratchet him closer to the engine.

Outside, a set of branches moved by degrees. He saw it through the small square of the shack window to his right. The laterals on the nearest Titan pulsed a coarse rotation toward the shack. Fine snow on those

needles sloughed, then clung again as they paused. Farther out, the flare's heat had fallen to a dull glow. Its influence held the far lines but the near ones overrode to the larger signal of sound and the engine's sustained heat.

Maya set the chain into the first root. The teeth bit and the sound moved into a lower pitch with load. Resin sprayed in a fan that cut across her visor and cheeks under the beanie edge. The smell carried a copper edge at once, the iron and resin mixing in the warm air. He tasted it along the back of his tongue, a tang that fell away after two breaths and then returned when she cut again.

The root sheared. The mat above it went slack. He pulled. It came away in a wet peel and took jacket fibers with it. Under the peel, the blistered area widened by a trace. He pressed the jacket against the skin to keep it from lifting again and went to the next mat.

The saw noise carried across the yard. It carried far enough that a lateral from the nearest Titan hit the shack window with a sharp impact. The pane cracked from the corner toward the center in a branching pattern. The limb did not punch through yet. The needles on that limb raked the pane and scored white lines in the frost before the glass cleared enough to show the green behind. The limb pulled back a centimeter and then drove again. The second strike took the glass. The pane fell inward in packeted shards. Cold air and grit blew into the room with a hard edge. A straight, stiff limb with dense needles moved across the space. Needles crossed against each other as the base rotated. They did not feel. They cut by contact.

"Door," Maya said without stopping the cut she had started. He moved his body to put himself between the limb and Nolan's face while he kept his hands occupied with the mat. A boot scuffed the exterior sill, off his cadence.

A figure filled the doorway for a fraction of a second. The sawyer in the gray beanie, the one who had stood with a hand on the tool cage wire,

had followed them. He had come in on the last of the off window without them seeing him. He had moved too fast at the end or the heater had clicked in the mess hall and wiped the timing because the sound of his step on the sill hit the slab a beat before his shout.

“What do you, ” he started. The limb crossed the room toward the engine. A tapered white root under the limb advanced with the limb’s movement. It was not a branch; it was a root that had come under the sill and up along the inside of the wall where framing had left a channel. The tapered root stabbed forward with the limb’s movement. It punched into the sawyer’s thigh, high and lateral where there was a lot of muscle to take a spike. The wood entered with steady force. All the sound in the room changed then. The saw carried on. The man screamed. The engine maintained a steady hum. The scream added a new band.

Maya pivoted without taking a step that would have scraped the chain on concrete. She brought the bar down onto the root where it entered the man’s leg. If she had cut at the wall she would have bound the chain. If she had cut at midspan the root could have levered and torn more tissue. She cut close to the exit wound to keep the cut shortest and the leverage smallest. She kept the bar nearly flat to prevent a bind and kickback. The chain bit. Sap and blood went up in a spray together. A fragment of wood and meat hit his sleeve. He did not wipe it away because the motion would have created a pressure wave in the air and he did not have a hand free.

The man dropped. He caught himself with one hand on the bench and slid down its face to the floor. The root segment he had carried in his leg fell with him, still embedded. Blood came fast and then steadied to a heavy flow. He pulled his cap down over his mouth with a reflex to smother the sound, then lost that control and let the cry out in a narrow, high-frequency tone that caused ear canal pain.

“Hand here,” Warren said, already there. He jammed the heel of his glove hard into the man’s femoral triangle proximal to the wound to compress the artery against bone. “Don’t move your leg. Don’t move.

Maya, ”

“I’ve got him,” she said, but she didn’t stop cutting Nolan’s bindings. She set the bar into another mat with a quick half-second cut. The mat parted in a chew that raised a spray. She backed off and let the chain spin free for a second to clear the build and then cut again.

More branches hit the outside wall. The shack frame vibrated as mechanical force transferred through studs to sill to concrete and into the soil. The window frame gave a single high crack as a screw tore free of wood, then held. The limb in the room raked along the engine casing, stripped paint in a clean line, and lifted before it could sweep lower and hit Nolan’s belly. Warren put his forearm up and took the needles across his jacket sleeve. They punctured the fabric but not his skin under the sweater and shirt.

Warren grabbed the pry bar from the floor with the hand that was not pressing the sawyer’s artery and used the hooked end to get under a mat that had resisted his pull. He levered it away from Nolan’s sternum while Maya took the root feeding it with a short cut. The mat peeled back and showed more blisters. In one spot the skin had split, and a line of white fibers showed embedded along a vessel track that had reddened. The fibers shifted with the contraction wave under the light touch of air, not alive in a separate sense but moving with the contraction cycle.

“Nolan,” he said, low, to fix his own focus and not to rouse the boy. “We’re here.” There was no change in the eyes. The chest moved that few millimeters again and then stilled.

The limb in the window pushed in farther. Two more impacts landed along the same wall from outside. The frame flexed until a second screw tore out and the angle changed by a few degrees. Snow from the window frame fell onto the engine casing and melted in fast circles. The room dropped by another degree as a band of colder wind found the opening.

“Warren,” Maya said. “Thirty more seconds and the wall fails.” She took one more cut at a mat that had woven itself through the fabric of the

jacket. The mat parted and recoiled, throwing a string of fibers into the air that stuck to the engine casing and curled toward the heat.

He looked at what still held Nolan. The root under the armpit remained. The mat along the spine remained. It would take another thirty seconds of cutting and pulling to free those, if nothing else changed. He looked at the sawyer's thigh. Blood had soaked his glove. The man's pupils were wide and flat. He could hold the artery off for a time, but not if they had to run.

Warren set his gloved fingertips on the spine mat and gave a millimeter of lateral pull. The mat snapped back and dragged skin with it in a tight rebound that promised tearing if he forced it. His fingers trembled once. The edge caught and split skin at his knuckle under the glove. He held his breath for one beat. Two mats still fused at the ribs; the armpit root and the spine tie held.

"Retreat," he said. "We take what we can carry. You, " He pointed with his chin at the sawyer. "We carry him now. Nolan stays marked to the engine." His teeth ground once.

Maya hit stop; the saw shut off. The sound ceased at once. The hum sounded louder in the sudden quiet. The roots did not relax when the saw shut off; they held their new tension for two seconds and then eased a degree.

Warren got his shoulder under the sawyer's arm while keeping pressure on the artery. Maya took the other side. They lifted. The man cried out and then ground his teeth and smothered the next sound in the wool cap he had dragged over his face. They moved at the off window by his count: relay due in five.

Hooking the pry bar into a loop of Nolan's jacket that he had freed, he pulled once, a test. The jacket shifted a centimeter and then caught again on the spine mat. Already over the seconds that cut would cost, he let go, the hook scraping off the jacket grommet with a short rasp under the engine's tone.

“Go,” he said, and they went out the door with the sawyer between them.

Snow hit their faces harder than before. A gust pulled heat from the shack door as the pressure equalized. The flare had burned down to a dull stump that still made a puddle of water around its core. The trunks that had oriented to it remained a degree toward that aisle, but the nearest trees had shifted to the shack. He watched the branch angles in the nearest row and saw them tighten by another notch as they crossed the open space. They moved on the same off-window cadence; the flare’s stub glowed faint in the snow.

Maya adjusted her grip on the sawyer without breaking cadence. He kept his pressure on the artery with the heel of his glove and let the weight of his body do the work so his arm wouldn’t jitter the slab. They moved through the alley not by looking around but by keeping their chins tucked and watching the ground where their feet would go and the bodies of the trees that framed the path. Drift had built across the yard since their outbound crossing, filling earlier boot marks until the surface looked unbroken.

A branch swept through the space behind them and hit the shack door they had just cleared. The door slammed into the jamb with a metal crack. A strip of light inside the shack went out. A circuit broke. He did not turn to see if any new light came back. He moved.

They reached the mess hall door with ten seconds left in the off window. He hit the handle with his elbow and shouldered them through. Cold air moved across the floor and stayed low. The door seals caught with a rubber squeak. Inside was warmer by just enough to sting his cheekbones. He did not stop. He and Maya brought the sawyer to the bench and set him down in one move.

“Pressure here,” he said to the nearest pair of hands without looking at whose hands they were. The man who had been at the coffee urn earlier in the night grabbed the spot with both hands and leaned his

weight into it with a grunt.

“Blanket,” Maya said. A spare blanket sat against the vending machine. Maya grabbed it and shoved it under the sawyer’s shoulders so his pelvis would fall lower than his chest if he passed out. The man shook with fine tremors that ran from ribs to fingers.

Vince stepped in from the hall with his eyes already narrowed. “What the hell did you,” He saw the blood, then the saw, then the empty space behind them where a third person should have been. His jaw flexed. “Where is he?”

Warren met his eyes and said, “Pinned. Not dead as far as we could tell. We couldn’t pull him without more cuts. The shack is compromised.” He wiped his sleeve on his pants to clear resin and blood so it wouldn’t glue his hand to his own clothing as it set.

Vince’s mouth shaped an O that did not make sound. Then he slammed his hand sideways against the wall where the thermostat sat and said, “This is superstitious bullshit, making rules while people bleed.”

The floor tremored under their feet with a short, fine pulse. It wasn’t a heavy hit against a wall. It was a fine vibration that traveled through the slab into shoes, ankles, joints, a distant truck-level vibration. The vending machine’s little fan made its high whine. The heater relay clicked on and then, for one beat, failed to trigger the blower because of low voltage. Then it caught and air moved through the vents.

Warren lifted his hand. He didn’t use it to point. He held a flat hand at shoulder height in the universal stop signal. People went still when he raised his hand.

He stepped in close to the group and said at a level that would not push air far, “Everything we do couples into the ground. Pressure waves move faster through substrate than air in this cold. They don’t need eyes. They orient to gradients and to periodic sources. Every footfall is a coordinate. Every object dropped creates an impact through the slab.” He stopped before naming any partner to the roots beyond the soil itself. He

did not break his own rule about timing, but he gave them enough to hold still.

The coffee-urn man held pressure on the sawyer's thigh and said, "I can't feel anything. Is that good?"

"Good for now," Warren said. He pressed the man's hands more medially with his own until he felt the artery under the surface and then took his hands away. "Stay right there."

Vince ran a palm over his face hard enough to pull the skin down over his cheekbones. "We're not turning down heat for your theories. I want a radio check-in. We raise somebody who can tell us what the hell to do. We get an ambulance headed up the road in case it opens." He pointed at the shelf where a set of old handhelds sat in a cheap plastic charger.

"No radio," Warren said. He kept it simple and left out the detail he could have delivered about acoustic shock and how air waves in a small room still transmit to studs and then to slab. "No sudden sound. Whisper. Movement only on the blower off window. Lower the setpoint three more degrees." He looked at the thermostat readout. Sixty-five from earlier. "Sixty-two." He raised his eyes to Vince. "Now."

Vince's face twisted. "You going to sign my OSHA forms when someone loses fingers?"

The floor tremor came again, this time a hair stronger. It had a periodicity to it, not random, a repeating tap pattern through the slab. One of the hands on the bench lifted his heel by reflex and then set it down gently when he caught himself. The tremor eased as the blower cycled down and the warm air thinned.

"Sixty-two," Maya said. She didn't add anything else. Her hands shook from adrenaline and cold, but her voice was steady.

Vince looked at her, then at the sawyer, then at the door, then at the thermostat. He swore and turned the dial until the readout ticked down. Sixty-two. He kept his hand on it, ready to turn it back. He left it set.

The blower shut off after a shorter on cycle. The room lost another degree at the skin. Breath fog thinned near the ceiling. The off window lengthened. Warren counted it in his head and kept his posture low and still: shoulders down, hands quiet, chin tucked. He kept to stillness to conserve heat and movement.

“Demo first,” he whispered. He pointed to the coffee-urn man and then to the sink. Two fingers held up: two steps. Flat palm down: slow. He counted under his breath, “Three. Two. One.” On his hand cue the man stood, lifted each foot without scrape, paused one beat with knees soft to let the slab settle, slid two steps, anchored with both feet, then returned the same way on Warren’s next cue. Warren pinched thumb and forefinger: good. Several people released breath quietly.

Maya knelt by the sawyer and looked at the wound without lifting her hands to touch it. The arterial bleed had slowed with pressure. Blood pooled under him anyway and ran along the grout line to the floor drain that had been there since the building had been poured. He took a breath and shut down the thought that wanted to travel into floor drains and what else would use that opening. Not now.

“What’s the plan,” she asked, pitched low and dry. “Say it short.”

“Staged moves on off windows,” he said. “One person at a time. No pulses on heat. No radios. No banging anything against anything. If we need to move outside, we use what’s left far and early. Inside, we conserve heat. Warmth comes from bodies and wool, not from the blower.” He looked at the blankets. “Use body-warmed blankets. Swap them when they cool. We keep people small and still. We wait for a change in the signal from the shack. If the engine tone drops or wavers, we launch on that dip and take the slack from the field. Not before.”

“You’re guessing,” Vince said.

“I’m extrapolating from observed behavior,” Warren said. “It’s better than noise.”

Vince reached for a radio anyway. He pulled it from the charger with a plastic click. The LED stayed dark for a second and then flickered. He thumbed the push-to-talk. Warren put two fingers on the man's wrist, not hard: a contact, not a fight. "Don't," he said.

"Get your hand off me," Vince said, volume rising.

"Don't," Warren repeated. He let his eyes slide down to the slab. He didn't need to say why. The small vibration came again, a distant periodic footfall pattern through the slab. The men by the table felt it through their shoes and looked down. Vince closed his mouth. He let go of the radio without keying it. He set it on the shelf and stepped back.

People pulled inward, leaving the walls unoccupied. A man by the sink took his boot off the footrail and set it on the flat. The heater cycle ran quiet now. Off lasted longer. On was shorter. The effect of that on the planted field outside would be measurable by branch angle if someone had been at the window to look. No one went to the window. Breath fog became the dominant visible movement. It blew out small and dissolved by the time it reached the middle of the room.

The sawyer's shivering got worse. He had light tremors first and then the kind that moved deep muscle groups. His jaw clicked once and then he clamped down. His eyes watered. He made a sound in the throat that was not a word and not a scream. Warren put his hand on the man's shoulder for a second, not comfort so much as information: contact that told the body the world still contained boundaries.

"Blanket swap," Warren said. He took the blanket that had been on the man and handed it to the coffee-urn man, who had kept his hands on the artery. "Put it under your jacket for a count of sixty. Breathe into it. Then swap back." The man nodded and shoved a corner under his Carhartt to warm it with his chest and belly. Maya pulled another blanket from the back of a chair that someone had been sitting on, and they layered it over the first one without lofting it to move too much air.

Warren looked toward the hall and then away from it. The small structural creak that had come through the wall earlier now repeated at irregular intervals, not rhythmic, but increasing in frequency. It was not the building making its own sound. It was the pressure being delivered to it from outside via branches and trunks contacting the siding and the lower sill where a root could find purchase.

“Warren,” Maya said. “The flare.”

“We keep flares for two cases: to pull something off someone in the open or to mask a move to the office or the tanker. Not for comfort,” he said. “We’ve got what’s in my pocket. The kit’s empty.” He knew what he had implied with “office” and “tanker.” He didn’t reverse it and he didn’t look at Vince when he said tanker.

Vince rubbed his jaw again. He looked older in the cold. “We’re not torching anything,” he said without force. He might have meant it. He might have meant to say anything to keep the room from jumping to the next thing too fast.

The heater clicked off and the off window stretched to what felt like a hundred seconds. No one moved. The saw’s smell hung in the room, a mix of gas, oil, sap, blood, at about knee height. No one coughed. If anyone’s throat scratched, he did not clear it. They let their bodies itch.

The sawyer’s shivering worsened again and then eased as the blankets warmed. He let out a long breath through his nose that fogged the air in front of his face. His hands loosened by a fraction. The coffee-urn man kept weight on the artery with his shoulders hunched and his face gray.

Warren bent and checked the wound quickly with a look only, not a touch. Resin and blood had mixed at the edge of the cut where Maya had severed the root. The mixture had made a brittle glaze at the margins where air hit it. Deeper in, the blood ran warm and dark. The portion of the root still embedded in the leg had swollen a trace in the last minutes, as if it had taken up water and expanded. He did not say that out loud.

He straightened and listened again. The generator's tone had not changed. The vibration through the floor kept its low amplitude but its occurrence was more frequent. Somewhere outside, snow slid off a metal surface after a gust thinned it. It hit the ground in a soft thud.

"Okay," Maya said softly. "What next when it's next?"

"We split the room into thirds," Warren said, keeping his voice behind his teeth. "Group A moves on the next long off. One person at a time. Group B follows one cycle later. Group C stays with the injured and does not move unless the wall begins to breach. Movement paths stay away from exterior walls and vents. If anyone drops something, they leave it on the floor. No one bends to pick it up." He stopped mid-sentence before he listed the reasons again.

Vince looked like he was going to say something sharp and then didn't. He put his palms down on the table, flat, and kept them there. He checked his dead watch out of habit and then looked away from it with a tight jaw.

The off window timed out to his count. The relay clicked on. Air moved. The noise of it was just air moving, not safe and not dangerous by itself. The group tracked it by the temperature shift without needing a clock.

Warren stood with his hands braced on the table near the sawyer's shoulder. The wool blanket rose and fell a millimeter when the hallway door opened to admit another draft. It was the draft. Not breath. He held still. The room followed the rules through repetition: stillness, heat discipline, one change at a time. He had more to say. He kept it for later and kept the timing.

Somewhere beyond the planted section, a thin, dry friction sound registered against the north wall, then stopped. He tracked the timing of it against the blower's off window and the generator's hum. The timing did not produce a gap. He noted it and did not act on it.

He counted again. The group waited with him and made almost no sound at all. The next tremor held a beat longer, with a lower frequency under the first.

Chapter 6

The Network

The heater relay clicked off. Airflow thinned. The room's temperature dropped a fraction that registered on skin before it registered in thought. Warren kept his palms on the table near the sawyer's shoulder and watched the wool lift a millimeter at the edge from the hallway draft. He said nothing. The table edge pressed under his hands; around him, postures set and eyes held to his cues.

Maya moved first in the off-window, not by walking but by sliding her weight backward onto the mess hall counter, bringing her boots off the slab. The coffee-urn man adjusted a knee on Warren's count without lifting a heel. Two others climbed onto tables, distributing their weight into thicker sections of concrete through metal legs. Every movement came with its own signal through the slab, the scrape of rubber, the tick of a chair foot touching a grout ridge, and each transmitted through Warren's boots as a fine shiver. They recalibrated. They shortened moves until feet left no trace.

Condensation grew along the window's lower sash. Beads formed and held. A wind gust stacked snow against the glass and then released, but little of that reached their ears. Exterior noise damped under the snow load. Inside, small systems took over the soundscape. The vending fan's thin whine. The thermostat's quiet click. The generator's hum coming through the slab and through framing as a steady baseline.

The sawyer's jaw chattered, a relay of deep muscle spasm that ran up into the bench. His blankets trembled. The tremor went into the legs and then into the floor.

"Folded towels," Maya whispered.

A woman in a red cap slid a stack of towels along the floor without lifting them. Maya reached down without coming off the counter and shoved them under the bench legs. The shudder dropped a notch. The coffee-urn man adjusted his hands on the femoral triangle without lifting his weight off the artery. The sawyer let out breath through his nose in three short pulses and then longer. Blood pooled under the bench and continued toward the floor drain in the mess hall, a dark run along the grout line that reflected the overhead lights in a thin ribbon. The embedded white root segment in his thigh had swollen a shade since they had carried him in. The glaze at the edge of the cut had thickened to a brittle shell where air hit it and stayed wet where the blanket trapped heat.

From down the hall came a metallic tap. Not loud. Sharp. A quick series of thin metallic closes. Another came after, offset. Warren counted it. He tracked the distance. Shower room. Right side drain.

He raised a hand and pointed down the hall. No one got up. The heater was off. They moved to the door of the mess hall on the off-window, three bodies only, Warren first, Maya behind him, the coffee-urn man last to keep weight on the artery until the last count and then swap hands with the man in the Navy coat. The new holder planted his elbows into the bench to keep load distributed and nodded. Warren and Maya crossed the threshold with the cadence they had established: lift feet clean, set them flat, no scrape. Breath into collars. Mouths closed.

The men's shower room was tiled and cold, steam condensed only where it met their faces. Four drains along the floor channels, stamped steel gratings with rust spots at three corners. The nearest grate moved on its seat in a small motion. Then again. In the space between taps, a white tip appeared under the grid. It touched the metal and withdrew. It advanced and tapped in a sequence that matched the meter of Mike, Navy coat's, foot shifting back at the bench in the next room. Another grate near the wall rattled and lifted a quarter inch and then settled back.

Warren dropped to a knee slow enough to keep the slab quiet and put two fingers on the tile so he could feel the movement in his bones. The tapping matched a subfloor wave, low-frequency, set by the room's layout and the plumbing. The source was not random. The same wave pattern recurred.

He had named pieces already for them and for himself. Nematode sequences for contractility and direction. Plant tissue that moved without a vascular feed if the gradient demanded it. He had avoided naming the other piece in the last hour. He kept his mouth close to the tile to keep sound from traveling far.

"It's using the mycorrhizae," he said. "Fungal hyphae around the roots. Those filaments pick up deformation. Stretch-activated ion channels in the hyphae open when the soil shears. The fungus releases signaling molecules along that strain field. The root reads the chemical gradient and the temperature gradient together. That tapping is not random."

Maya followed his fingertip to the grate. The white tip touched the metal grid and flattened, then lifted. It tested a slot and did not fit. It tested another and did not fit. A line of black sludge around the steel rim broke and smeared when the tip slid. The tip's surface held a wet, pale sheen, not woody.

"Don't breathe on it," Warren said.

She drew her collar higher. The white tip tested a seam where metal met tile and then paused. It oriented toward the heat of his hand through the tile. He could feel the change without looking: the faintest shift in the rhythm of motion and then that pause that showed it had detected a stronger gradient. He lifted his hand away and the tip paused. He put his knuckles onto a different part of tile and the tip oriented to the new contact.

"Coupling," he said. "It can map this room faster than we can move in it. Stillness buys us time."

He turned his head and looked back at the doorway where the coffee-urn man waited, head tipped so breath went into his jacket. Vince stood in the hall, shoulders squared into the jamb, rubbing a thumb along the dead watch face. His jaw worked. His fingers trembled. His hand went to his belt.

“Don’t,” Warren said.

Vince had the radio in his hand. The LED on the charger shelf had flickered earlier; he had put it back without keying it. Now, with the drains and grates tapping, his thumb found the push-to-talk. His fingers weren’t working right. Numbness from the cold had shortened his range. The radio slipped. He tried to catch it. He hit it with the heel of his hand and knocked it sideways. It struck the wooden bench by the hall and made a single, sharp clack before it slid onto the concrete and skated an inch into a wet footprint.

Breaths stopped mid-draw. A raised hand held in place over a table edge. Eyes widened and then fixed on the hall. In the shower room, the tap rate increased, shorter intervals, for three beats; then a hairline crack opened another six centimeters along the grout near the threshold.

Warren lifted his hand and held it flat. Vince’s jaw moved. No sound came out. He bent and retrieved the radio with two fingers and set it on the table, slow enough that it made no scrape.

“Outside?” Vince whispered, so low the sink cut it off at the backsplash.

“It’s quieter,” Warren said. “That makes what we are doing louder.”

They backed from the shower room to the mess hall during the same off-window. They reentered on the count. The towels under the bench had picked up blood. The coffee-urn man’s shoulders had begun to shake from isometrics. He did not shift his weight. He kept the artery pinned. The sawyer’s eyes tracked under his lids once and stilled again.

“Watch the joints,” Warren said. “Any control joint, any crack. Anything the builders cut to keep the slab from splitting. That’s a line they can exploit.”

The heater relay clicked and failed to catch. The thermostat display held at sixty-two. The LED in the power strip stayed steady.

The first change in the slab wasn’t a sound. It was a rise. A slight lift along a saw-cut a foot in from the exterior wall, a line that ran under the length of the metal shelf and out under the vending machine. The concrete lifted enough to pinch a shard of glass against a table leg and then settled back. A hairline crack formed between two tiles at the edge of the mess line. Rust halos around the threshold fasteners at the door to the hall bled into small blooms as moisture wicked up. The tile there arched a fraction and then snapped back flat. A white line showed in the crack. It advanced by increments. The end was blunt-tapered and shined under the fluorescent light. Its surface looked hydrated. It moved in steps, a rotational pattern at the tip that displaced grout dust and then engaged again.

Warren did not put a foot near it. He didn’t put anything near it that would heat the tile. He stood still and watched the pattern. It wasn’t drilling. It used the cement matrix to anchor micro-pulses that moved mass forward by sequential 1, 2 mm contractions.

Down the hall, the shower room produced three pops in sequence, each one a grate lifting and then striking back down on ceramic. Then one grate lifted and stayed tilted against a white bundle, their earlier single tip now a cluster of six to eight, compressed together by the geometry of the drain. That bundle thickened, pushed, and slid water outward ahead of it. Pressure forced brown water from the P-trap in a single pulse and it ran across the tile into the channel and out toward the hall. The smell carried:

anaerobe rot, iron, and the tang that rode resin aerosol in the shed earlier in the night.

It wasn't only the drains. A vent register along the interior wall drew air, not much but enough of a temperature gradient to count. Someone had a backpack on the floor near it, nylon with a stitched patch. A white root from the slab crack intersected the backpack's strap, found purchase, and tightened. The pack dragged an inch. The nylon rasped on tile, a dry sound. The pack dragged again, an inch and a half this time. The root shifted orientation and advanced toward the register one slow centimeter at a time, pulling the strap.

"Don't," Warren said, when an arm tensed.

"How," the owner began.

"Leave it," Maya said.

The pack moved at a steady rate. The root changed path to line up with the vent register. When it encountered the chair leg Warren had meant to wedge for another use, he changed plans. He took the wooden chair by the back with his cold gloves and pushed one leg into the crack, not to break the root, he wouldn't, but to make a new point of contact with a small heat edge at the wood, a pressure target. The root paused and oriented to the leg. The pack stopped moving for the moment.

"Warmth. Pressure. Shallow gradient," Warren said. "It'll test the chair now. It buys time."

"What if you make it worse," Vince said. He kept his voice below the bench height and back from the wall where studs would carry it.

"We already made it worse just by existing," Warren said, and stopped.

A thin tendril slithered up out of the crack by the door and across the toe of Vince's boot. He jerked without thinking and kicked. The tendril lifted with the boot and wrapped the toe half a turn. It tightened. The pressure came through the rubber and into his toes, bright and

immediate. He sucked air between his teeth and clamped his jaw before the sound rose.

“Hold,” Warren said.

Vince didn’t hold. He brought a hand down to his pocket and to the small knife he had used a thousand times to cut strapping and twine and food wrappers. He snapped it open. The blade was short and dull at the tip but sharp enough on the belly. He slipped the steel under the tendril where it crossed leather and sawed at it. The tendril tightened around the boot toe. He worked the blade. The steel bit. The tendril cut and a clear fluid misted over the toe, cold, and then the tendril recoiled. The cut end writhed and found the boot’s welt and held there a second before losing purchase. Vince swore without using his voice and scraped the fluid off on the back of his other pant leg. The cold soaked into his toes anyway.

The building’s pipes shifted. Metal in wall cavities vibrated against fasteners as the network tugged on the plumbing from below and from the side. Pressure imbalances forced gas and stained water up through P-traps. Brown water pushed into a sink and then ran along its basin. A smell of sulfur and iron gained strength and layered over the resin and blood tang already in the room. The coffee-urn man dragged a sleeve over his upper lip without thinking and then froze his hand mid-motion to keep that drag from pushing into the slab.

The heater relay clicked and caught this time. Air moved. It felt dangerous. It felt necessary. Air moved across their faces and made the drains steam where cold met warmer and produced a white film that hung knee-high. The moment the blower started, roots near the vent register lifted toward the register with new speed.

“Up,” Warren said, pointing to the ceiling, and then flattened his hand, palm down, to signal restraint.

Three faces tilted toward the panels. A grip tightened on the table edge. Weight shifted in half-steps that held silent.

Maya was already moving. She grabbed the near end of the sawyer's bench and lifted six inches. The coffee-urn man slid his hands without lifting the heel he had planted in the femoral triangle. Another person stepped under the bench end and took the load. The bench rose a foot. The roots made a ropey sound against the underside as they slid and sought new edges. The sawyer made a sound between teeth and cap that wasn't a word. Maya adjusted the towels again and shoved a third folded stack under the bench leg nearest the crack.

"Ceiling," she said.

Warren looked up. The mess hall's ceiling panels were fiberboard squares set into a thin metal grid. An access panel for ducting sat four panels in from the east wall. The short pry bar he had kept from the rescue leaned against the sink. He took it and tested a corner. The panel resisted with a tacky stick. He stopped. He waited for the blower to cycle off before he put force into a bend that would pop the corner and send a tremor into the studs.

The heater clicked off. He levered. The corner gave with a dry tear. He kept the bar against the edge so the panel wouldn't fall free and slap, then eased it out in one controlled motion and slid it onto the counter. A dark space above showed rafters and dust and cold air that had collected above the board plane. Ducting ran two joists over; a cable tray followed the north wall.

"Belts," he said.

Maya had one around her waist under her coveralls. Another man in a plaid shirt took off his belt and fed it up. Warren looped both through the cross-beam above the opening to make slings. He knelt and threaded the first under the sawyer's shoulders and pinned arm. He threaded the second under the pelvis, taking care not to disturb the towel stack that kept the blanket elevated away from the embedded fragment and the arterial compress. The coffee-urn man adjusted his stance and kept pressure without letting his shoulder or boot scrape.

“On my count,” Warren said, low and even. “Three. Two. One.”

They lifted. The bench creaked. The belts took load. The sawyer’s breath rasped through wool and teeth and then shortened to a grunt. He did not scream. Maya’s voice stayed level; her hands moved on a clean rhythm. The coffee-urn man kept his weight pressed into the artery through the lift, shoulder trembling under isometric load. The sawyer rose. The belts held. Warren and Maya hauled him onto the table and then up into the gap to the beam. The sawyer’s boots skidded on the panel lip, then cleared.

Roots extended toward his boots when they swung. One brushed the side of his boot and left a streak of resin on the leather. Another slid along a bench rung, left a wet line, and retracted. The resin felt cold when it hit skin where gloves had pulled back from wrists and contacted. Warren ignored it and returned to the work.

“Next,” Maya said.

Two more went up. Vince stood under the opening and did not climb. He passed up the injured first, then the woman in the red cap, then the Navy coat. His breath made a saw noise in his throat. He kept his mouth closed and let it out his nose. He checked the floor for dropped tools and exits.

The coffee-urn man handed pressure off again to a younger hand and then pulled himself up by his elbows. He left one knee on the bench until the last possible moment to keep load on the artery through contact, then withdrew that knee and boot together to avoid a scrape.

Someone on the floor misjudged a handoff. A boot came off in a hand and then slipped. It fell six feet and hit tile. A white root half as thick as a wrist snaked around it before it bounced. The boot stopped moving. The root pulled the boot toward the crack. The boot went through a gap that closed behind it to the width of a finger. Breaths halted. A forearm froze mid-reach. Someone swallowed; the sound clicked once and stopped.

“Move,” Maya said.

Warren's shoulders burned from the lift and from bracing in the cold. Through his nose, a count to slow his heart. He pulled himself into the rafters and flattened along a beam. Dust shifted when he lay down and settled in his eyebrows. His breath fogged the space for a second and then disappeared into the upper void. The wood was cold. The metal hangers that held the rafters transmitted skin heat into the structure. Keeping forearms off those where he could, he settled weight on bone.

The heater stayed off. The only moving air came from the cold itself and from the displaced volume of people adjusting a fraction at a time. Below, the mess hall's layout blurred under motion. Root bundles forced the drain grates up and extruded across tile. The backpack at the register vanished into white fibers that braided through nylon. A chair slid on the tile at a uniform rate, about an inch every two seconds. The blanket on the bench where the sawyer had been lay flat, then lifted at three points from below as roots pushed and probed for edges. The towels under the bench legs damped the bench's motion but did not stop the movement.

Vince climbed last. He came up the opening and turned to lay flat along a beam without words. He put his cheek on the wood to keep his head down. His hands shook. He put them under his chest to keep them still.

Warren lay on the beam with his head toward the opening and watched the pattern below. It had logic. It wasn't a frenzy. It was a mapping operation. He did not say that out loud.

"Listen," he whispered to Maya at his shoulder. "That resonance you hear? That's the pipe run. They're on it. The fungus senses what the pipe does to the soil when water moves. There's no eyes involved. No brains. Just sensors and effectors. The hyphae convert deformation into chemical gradients. The fibers in the roots do the rest. It's enough."

"That's fucked," she whispered.

"We shrink and we wait for a change in the generator tone," he said. "If it dips, they move. That's when we move."

She nodded and inched the sawyer's belt loop farther over the beam so it would not slip if he had a spasm. She checked the towel roll she had jammed into a wedge against his pelvis so the embedded fragment would not grind. She did not touch it. She would not touch it unless he started to slide.

The generator kept its tone. The heater came on and off and they tracked it with skin, not ears. The off windows felt longer. He stopped tracking minutes; he tracked the heater cycle, grate taps, and floor tremors.

A breath count to keep his body from throwing heat spikes into the space. Five in. Seven out. Not enough. Six. Eight. Rhythm held. Tongue against the roof of his mouth to mute the sound. Amplitude down until no fog appeared at all.

Below them, a root slapped a bench rung. The sound was a wet thud. Another root hit a trash can and knocked it over. Four aluminum cans rolled out and chimed, then settled. A third root slithered up a table leg and swept the top, moving napkins and a paper plate without preference, until it found the heat rim of a coffee mug that had been near a hand and had stayed warm. It held at the mug's rim where residual warmth remained and traced the ring.

Warren watched with the part of his mind that watched things in study. He kept still.

"Hyphae detect shear," he whispered. "They release a chemical trace. Roots follow the steepest part, intensified by heat and pressure from bodies."

Maya grunted assent. She had her cheek against the wood and eyes half-closed. She didn't sleep. She kept the count with him. When the heater kicked off, they felt it in their eyebrows more than anywhere else.

The sawyer's breath rasped twice and then steadied again under a shallow cadence. The coffee-urn man's shoulders twitched and then locked as he fought another shiver. His face had turned gray in a way that

had nothing to do with dirt. He had blood on his sleeve in a stripe from where he had kept pressure against the artery and pulled back only to climb.

Light didn't change. It would be hours before the mountain did that for them.

Another drain cap near the mess line lifted and spun. The white bundle under it thickened. A new hairline crack ran through a tile near the vending machine and a white tip appeared there too. Small things disappeared without drama: a dropped napkin, the edge of a glove cuff that had hung off the table. The television in the bunkhouse room beyond stayed dark. The glow from its dead little LED had long since gone out.

"Vince," Maya whispered, "if we get a chance to move, I want you to go second. Warren goes first. He knows where to put his feet. You don't argue. You just match his cadence."

Vince gave a single nod. His hands had stopped shaking.

Warren held the count. The heater clicked on. Air moved. Below, roots near the register accelerated again. He put his forehead on the beam and let the cold of the wood sink into his skin. He aligned his breath with the numbers and kept his eyes on the same patch of floor until his blink rate slowed.

He had one flare in his pocket and he left it there.

He waited for the next change.

He tracked only how long bodies stayed flat and quiet on wood. Warren listened through that duration. Beneath them, the floor moved. Not as one thing. In increments that summed into a broad advance. The pack by the register vanished by degrees. The chair leg he had pushed into the crack had become a new focus. The root climbed it and tightened

on it and tested it with small pulses measured in millimeters. It did not lever the chair. It evaluated the leg with those pulses.

A second root extended to the footrail under the stainless counter. It crawled along it until it found the line of heat under the counter itself where bodies had been an hour ago. It held there on the low heat band. It held.

Warren counted again. Blower silent. Five in. Seven out. Not enough. Six. Eight. Rhythm held. Hands still. Chin tucked. Shoulders loose. He forced focus back to the count. He waited for the engine tone to change.

A new vibration came through the slab. He waited another count to confirm it wasn't him. It showed up as a beat pattern under the generator's base note. The period ran about two seconds, then faded. It came again on a different axis. It faded again. He kept the information. He did not move.

The sawyer let out a low sound. Maya adjusted the belt loop over the beam and tightened the wedge at his pelvis a degree. She put a hand on his shoulder and left it there until the tremor passed. She removed it to avoid heat loss through her palm.

"Tell me when it dips," she whispered. It wasn't a question. It was an assignment.

"I will," he said.

He looked past her to where Vince lay. Vince's eyes stayed fixed on the opening. Jaw set. When Maya spoke, he gave one short nod.

A root below slapped the vending machine. The machine's fan whine wavered, then steadied. A white tip found the fan grille and tested it with thin filaments that slipped through the slats and flexed toward the small bit of warmth behind. The filaments withdrew when they met the fan blade's spin and then returned on a different slat, mapping.

Warren kept the count. He kept his attention on the pattern below and did not move his head.

On the next heater cycle, the blower whined and then settled. The off-window after that stretched longer as the thermostat tried to hold at sixty-two with less duty. He got ready to cue them. He kept his hand tight to the beam so he wouldn't reflexively gesture into open air and make a sound.

He waited for the generator to dip.

It did not.

They stayed on the wood, kept contact points minimal, and stayed flat on the beams.

Roots extruded from the drains at a steady, measurable rate. If anyone had stood on the tile, motion would have transmitted through boots as a slow rise and fall. No one stood there. Movement concentrated at vents, drains, and warm objects. Above, they minimized motion and surface area.

Warren set his palm on wood and kept the breath count steady, and he kept it there until the next thing happened. Dust settled on his lip; he didn't lift his face. Below, metal scraped along a pipe. Regular. Close.

Chapter 7

The Ornament

He kept his face on the wood until the dust stopped moving. The panel edge pressed his wrist. Breaths were shallow or not visible at all. Cold concentrated along the duct run and the cable tray on the north wall; a slight rise near the panel gap. The beam held steady under his sternum. Through his sweater his chest transmitted almost nothing into the timber. That had been the point of getting them up here: fewer contact points, slower heat loss, less coupling into the slab that the fungal network could read.

He marked the heater relay with the dull change at his eyebrows rather than a click. Off. On. The long, merciful off-periods bought small windows where nothing shifted air through the registers. He timed his blink to the count. Five in. Seven out. Not enough. Six. Eight. The rhythm kept his mouth closed and his breath under the wool. The taste under the wool was gauze and old metal.

Two joists over something blocked a small, weak reflection. He thought at first it was the corner of the access panel they had levered. Then the shadow around the hood shifted two or three degrees when the register pulled, movement a panel would not make. A line of silver at a shoulder seam took a trace of light and then lost it. He put his cheek flat and kept his eyes on that dark bit. No one spoke. He raised his right hand along the beam and touched two fingers down in warning for quiet before he inched forward, making sure sleeve and beam slid without noise. Maya did not move. Vince did not move. The sawyer made a low sound and cut it off in his throat.

The shape was a man. Jacket bulk and a hood bunched under the back of a skull. The hood had a reflective pip sewn into the seam. It caught the low spill from the panel gap between their bay and the next. A boot hung free. The other boot heel caught above a metal hanger. A belt had been used and then replaced by something else. White cords passed through the jacket and into the wood and duct struts. Between the cords, fine filaments glistened with condensed moisture. They threaded into the face at the corners of the mouth and around the nose. When the heater cycled and air moved through the register, the filaments moved toward it and then returned to a more neutral state when the blower stopped.

He did not say the man's name because the man did not have a name here beyond a job. Grader operator. He had locked the tool cage when Vince told him to. He had not been in the mess hall when they hoisted up. No one had asked where he had gone, because asking would have drawn sound and move into the floor.

Warren didn't raise the thermal scope. The chance of a bump into the metal hanger was non-zero. He didn't need the scope to know the thing hung in that void was warmer than wood. Residual core heat was enough to make the filaments hold. Enough to justify the lift.

"Don't look long," he whispered. He formed the words with jaw and tongue to limit air.

Maya moved her eyes, not her head. She put her palm flatter onto her beam. Her throat moved once under the knit fabric of her beanie pulled low. The injured sawyer's teeth clicked under wool and stopped.

The filaments had taken the most available paths. Superficial veins at the temple and along the neck had a faint tracer line under the skin, a milk-white track beneath the surface. The right forearm, where sleeve rode up, showed a paler band over a surface vein on the forearm. Under the belt line, the jacket lifted in slight pulses that matched the slow contraction-relaxation he had recorded in the generator shack over Nolan's ribs. There was no respiratory movement. The minute excursions

happened in mats that were feeding, not in a chest moving air.

“They’re in the return lines,” he said. “Venous. Lower pressure. They route easier than arterioles do. Less active contraction to fight. Once they’re under the skin they follow the vessel map. Suspension maximizes exposure and keeps the conduits from collapsing under weight.” He kept his cheek on wood and spoke no louder than before.

Vince didn’t answer. He had one hand under his ribs like he was keeping it from shaking by pinning it. His face was turned the way men turned their faces at injuries on jobs long before this night, when the injury belonged to a machine or a chain, and not something that moved without a motor.

The thing that had been a man rotated. It didn’t rotate from a choice. The heater had come on. Air moved at the register on the far side of the cavity. The cords made their tiny stretch under a load you could measure if you put a strain gauge on them. The torso rotated toward the register and then checked and rotated back until the cords equalized. The head turned with the mass. The eyes, where they had not glazed over all the way, reflected a little. They faced down and to the side where Vince lay.

A sound came out of someone up there. A compressed sob without the breath behind it. Warren said “Quiet,” and the sound stopped. He didn’t look to see who had made it. The sound was the difference between life and a white tip testing a crack at the edge of the panel where his wrist lay.

He could see where the cords went. Into beam wood at the points where the grain was open. Into the strap points on the duct. Into the cable tray where cable ran a fraction above ambient, a thermal contrast that drew fibers. Into a knot of filament at the clavicle that behaved like the spine mat in the generator shack, only smaller because it didn’t have an engine underneath it.

Four primary cords entered at temple, clavicle, forearm, and duct strap; a smaller bundle at the clavicle. A body held clear of surfaces to

simplify reach and flow. The fibers needed an exchange surface and they had made one out of a man.

Maya's hand closed harder on the beam. Her glove creaked once. She stopped it before the creak could transmit into hardware. The sawyer's low sound had come back without him trying to make it. It was trapped behind his teeth.

"They map by strain and temperature," Warren said, still at the same volume. "They have no incentive to stop at skin. You can see the track along the superficial veins. The fibers are using pressure gradients and the low-pressure return to travel. It's a distribution node now."

He didn't add anything about hunger. That was a word that fit the mouth too easily. He had said it before: no cruelty was needed for this to work. Only consequence.

Vince blinked. He looked away. He looked back. The eyes in the face across from him had moved with the rotation of the head so they lined up again, two glares of low light, not meaning anything, just optics. Vince made a small sound in his throat and pressed his lips together until they whitened.

Below them, down in the mess hall, something slid across tile. He knew the sound before he saw it: furniture moving because the slab formulation had a pre-scored line there and the roots had concentrated under it. The heater off-cycle came and the register stopped pulling. The suspended body rotated back a degree and held.

"Count," he said, barely audible. He didn't look for Maya's face. He felt the small adjustment in her breath next to him. She had kept the count going with him all night. He kept his own going. Off. Another ten. Another ten. Another ten. The longer the off-period, the safer the things above remained. Safe didn't apply in a way that would satisfy anyone who wanted it simple. It applied in the way numbers applied: linked to variables he could actually observe.

The sawyer moved his mouth under the fabric. “Don’t let me end up,” he said. The rest didn’t make it. His voice couldn’t handle the breath.

“You won’t,” Maya said, without a pause. Her voice had no extra in it. She didn’t look at the suspended worker. She kept her eyes on the beam in front of her and kept her fingers closed around the belt loop that ran over the sawyer’s pelvis, making sure it didn’t slide.

He kept the plan defined against the body in the next bay. The body was a definition too. This is what the system did with a heat gradient and accessible conduits. This is what the system would do again in other rooms, and outside, and inside the things that burned fuel.

“Vince,” he said.

Vince didn’t answer right away. He squeezed his eyes shut. Opened them. Then he said, very soft, “We call it in. We get people up here. It’s what you do.” He stopped mid-whisper and clamped his jaw.

“You heard the drains when you dropped that radio,” Warren said. “You saw what happened when the saw lit. More heat, more weight, more feet will be coordinates. You’ll bring them to exactly where this is strongest.”

Vince’s tongue moved behind his teeth. He swallowed. “They’ll think I made this up.” He kept his voice at the ragged whisper, still trying not to push into the slab through sound. “I signed the intake. I initialed the vendor sheet when the shipment came in last spring. I told them we could do volume. That we could make up the shortfall. That this would save the pension. It was the only way we kept it.”

His voice rasped in the cold, consonants catching. He kept the sentences short in the rafters. They were admission and not solution.

“You can still stop it from going farther than this ridge,” Warren said.

“How?” Vince said. Not aggressive. Not willing. Low and flat.

“We don’t just run. Fifty went out before the road was completely gone,” Warren said. “You loaded them. We both saw the tags on the

bench. VIPs. They were on a clock. If we call, we will scatter responders to those addresses. They'll stand in heated rooms and breathe on the stands. They'll make everything worse." He paused only long enough to keep his breath control. "We wipe the data here. We take out the paper and the drives in the shipping office. We take out the seed stock in the greenhouse. We burn this grove. Then we get small, stay cold, and let the cold and the river do what they can with what's left."

Across the dark, Maya said, "Fuel." The word was barely air. "The depot's the only punch. One run. We get one run."

Warren didn't nod because his head against the wood would click. He agreed by keeping the count.

She pressed her palm into the beam and held a breath for a beat. "We do it. All of it," Maya breathed.

Vince squeezed his eyes shut for a second. Opened them. "Somebody's coming," he said. "They always come."

"They come with engines," Warren said. "With gas heaters and radios and bottle breath fog. They won't be more fit than we are to move in this. We move before they do. We choose the direction." He shifted his right hand until two fingers touched the beam and lifted a millimeter and put down a millimeter, indicating a step only visible to the people closest to him. "We pick the window with the least wind. The blower off-state. The generator tone dip if it ever comes. Two joists per OFF up here; outside, five meters per OFF window."

Vince shifted his boots until his toes aligned with the line Warren had indicated, then went still.

The generator's pitch did not change. It had held steady for an hour at least. The small wobble earlier had not repeated. The dull pain along his knuckles from the pry bar had gone cold. In the mess hall, a can rolled and then stopped.

“I don’t want to hang,” the sawyer said like he was pushing the words up because there was nowhere else to put them. “Not like that.”

“You won’t,” Maya said again. “We’re putting you over the showers. Coldest cavity we’ve got. We’ll strut you hard on the belts and come back if we can.” She set her glove gently on his shoulder and then lifted it again to avoid heat transfer. “You’ll stay colder than anything that comes up through those drains.”

He stuck to procedures and measurable causes. Reasons he could give. He made the reasons take shape in other people’s hands. That was the whole use of science under this pressure. Not moral, not story. Tools.

Warren turned his face a fraction to keep his lips away from the open part of the bay. “We have a single flare left. It goes far, ahead of us, and early. Not close. It’s for pulling a line off someone in the open or to pull a mouth away from a door we need.”

“Office first,” Maya said.

“Office first,” he said. “Then the greenhouse.”

“Records,” Maya said, adding it to make the list tangible in the same way he had just done with the flare.

“Paper. Drives. Manifests,” he said. He did not name names. He did not scramble for guilt beyond what was useful. This was all body and heat and records now.

Vince breathed in through his nose. It rasped. He shoved his hands deeper under his chest to hold them still and to warm his fingers enough to keep feeling. “You’re going to set fire to this place,” he said. His tone carried no accusation. A man in front of his face was held up by plant tissue and plumbing geometry.

“If we do not, the road takes this everywhere,” Warren said. “Not because anyone wants it to. Because that’s what systems do when no one interrupts them.” No we. No you. He meant mechanics.

The heater clicked on. The draft through the register two bays over picked up and brushed his eyebrow hair. The cords in the suspended man eased and reloaded under the small shift. The head turned a notch and then checked at the limit. The lower jaw had sagged open but not all the way. There was dried resin mixed with blood at the corner of the mouth, a thin glaze; it had set and fractured into fine lines.

They waited for the cycle to end. It did. The air thinned. Condensation that had formed in the register at the edges turned to fine frost as the gradient fell.

“First light’s minimum,” Warren said. “Coldest point. Wind often drops in that gray. Snow packs and crusts. Our signatures go down and coupling into the ground eases, a little. We move then. Not before.” He put his palm back down on the beam. The wood held the same cold it had a minute ago. “Until then, keep the core down. Don’t look at him.”

No one moved their head toward the next bay. Maya’s jaw muscles bunched under the knit. Vince didn’t look down the line again.

He adjusted the sawyer’s belt loop two notches over the beam with a quarter inch slide. The sawyer grunted once and bit down. The woman in the red cap had her face in her sleeve like she was wiping her mouth, but she didn’t move the sleeve when the heat would’ve transferred.

“Shipping office,” Maya said, again, not because she had forgotten, but because saying it in small sounds made it real and kept them in the plan and not in the rafters two bays over.

“Yes,” he said. “Then the greenhouse.”

“The truck lot in between,” she said.

“The drift there might cover footprints,” he said. “Or it might freeze prints into raised edges that will crack if stepped on. We don’t step in the hard crust if it bridges. We place feet on shallow, loose snow to reduce transmission. If we have to cross the slab, we put down fabric and drag it instead of carrying, so we don’t put down points. Movement on off-cycles

only.” He put his face flat again to keep the muscles still under his skin. “We watch for the generator drop. If we get one, we take that window.”

The generator’s pitch stayed where it had been. Maybe the load had stabilized at this ambient and with whatever the Titans had done to the shack. It didn’t matter. He wanted the drop. He could plan without it.

“I’ll go first,” he said. “Five meters apart per OFF window. Exact. If I go down, you freeze. Don’t drag me. If I can feel it coming, I’ll throw heat away from me. If I can’t, it will be fast enough to make decisions for us.”

“No hero lines,” Maya said, so flat and quiet that it wasn’t a rebuke so much as a boundary drawn in the joint space.

“Not a line,” he said. “Procedure.”

Vince breathed out through his nose. “What if it doesn’t burn?” he said. “What if it wicks diesel across surface area and holds it and wraps the truck like it did the shack?” He looked like he hated himself the moment he said it. No one replied. Breath sounds stayed low.

“You saw resin aerosol in the shed. That copper note,” Warren said. “You saw what it did to the saw’s heat. You saw blended accelerants in the needles, gloss that shouldn’t have stayed that glossy at this ambient. It’s ready to go if we raise temperature fast. A rapid temperature spike causes structural collapse; a slow rise allows routing.”

Down in the mess hall, another chair leg scraped an inch and then stopped as a root bundle adjusted. Brown water washed up into the sink and left a rust edge on the drain basket. A small slap at the vending machine grille told him the filaments were still testing the fan’s warmth between blade passes.

“We get him over the showers now,” Maya said. “The drain sound is strongest there, but the air is coldest. Less draw from the register. And we can wedge him from swinging.”

“On the next off-window,” he said.

They waited. When the blower clicked off, he and Maya and the coffee-urn man adjusted their elbows and knees and slid the sawyer along the belt loops half a foot toward the shower room bay. The belts rasped against the wood a little. The sawyer cut off a sound between his teeth. Warren kept the pelvic wedge he had made with the towel in place and moved with a rate that tracked his count. They made the transfer and set the belt flat across a different beam, then lay back down. The sawyer trembled and then held.

“Good,” Warren said so low it barely counted as sound. It needed to be said anyway.

He felt the flare against his ribs in the pocket where he kept it separate from the root tip bag. The bag under his sweater at his sternum had stopped picking up new condensation against his skin. The tip inside had pressed against the inner seam and gone still as its temperature equalized. He thought of taking it out, just for the feeling of control, the click of the magnifier light and the way the tip would track the lamp. He left it where it was. There would be nothing to learn from it that he did not already know and he would be trading heat for reassurance.

“First light,” Maya said. The words formed without air puff. “Gray. Before the wind changes.”

“First light,” he said.

The suspended body in the next bay shifted a fraction as one cord redistributed load across the duct strap. It gave off a sound, the tiny tick of a stretched material moving past its threshold while staying intact. It wasn't a groan. It wasn't speech. The cord ticked once; no other sound. No one turned their head toward it.

Cold from the wood moved into his forehead until the ache in his temples dropped a level. He kept the count going. Changes stayed simple in his head. The office had a metal door on the courtyard side. The greenhouse panes read as dark with snow against them. The depot sat lower than the office, tucked where the wind dropped skiffs of powder

and built dunes against the tanker's tires. He held the layout in distances and angles, with variables he could influence.

"Vince," he said.

Vince made a short sound to indicate he was listening.

"If we get you as far as the office, you follow Maya exactly. You go second. You do not improvise. If your watch were working you'd set it to my count. It doesn't. So you match her toes." He paused long enough for the heater to click on and for a new pull to move air over his eyebrows. "This is not a vote. This is the only way you exit this building on your feet."

Vince didn't speak. He lay with his cheek on the wood. After a long moment he brought his hands out from under his chest and flattened them on the beam, palms down. The move pinned his fingers so they wouldn't bang against hardware when the off-window came.

"Addresses," Maya said into the off air. "We burn every manifest. No recall list. No addresses to hunt."

"Yes," Warren said. "No call tree. No scatter." He watched the panel opening with the corner of his left eye. "If someone finds this place later, they find ash and drift. They don't find a box of routes to warm homes."

"They'll call it something else when they come," Maya said.

"Maybe," he said. "We won't be here to hear it."

The heater stopped again. The room under them cooled another fraction. The register sucked air feebly at the tail end of the cycle and then released it. He marked the extension of the off-window and stored it. He put his knuckles on the beam and lifted a fraction and put down a fraction: a signal. Two cycles from now, they would move the sawyer another inch to lock his belts tighter over the shower bay. After that, they would stop moving anything at all until first light.

He thought of the bridge down over the river and the way ice-free water moved between rafts of slush. He noted the distance and order

without giving it image. It wasn't a thing for tonight. It was a thing that existed and might be used later to hide thermals from something built to read them.

Root activity continued below. White bundles rose from the drain near the mop sink and flattened with each new pulse of brown water coming up through the P-trap. A thin fiber went into the vending machine grille and came back with a smear of dust on it and then went in again at a different slat.

"Sleep if you can," he said, barely sound. No one slept.

Tongue pressed to the roof of his mouth, he kept the breath at six and eight. The count ran between cycles. His gaze stayed on the wood and the panel edge. The suspended worker two bays over turned another fraction and stopped. The eyes lined up again with where Vince lay. The resin-and-blood glaze at the corner of the mouth cracked another hair.

No one looked that way.

They waited for gray light, when ambient usually fell about a degree and wind sometimes slackened. They waited for a dip in a generator that might not dip. They waited with every hand quiet on wood.

When the heater clicked on one more time and air brushed over his eyebrow, he used the airflow to carry his whisper across the small reach it could travel without hitting the panel edge. "Office. Greenhouse. Depot," he said. "Then we see if the cold and the river are enough."

Chapter 8

The Manifest

They lay belly-down on joists. Cold from the joists soaked through his jacket and tightened his back muscles, and every palm stayed flat to avoid accidental taps against metal. He counted silently, matched to the blower cycle. Heater on. Air pulled across his eyebrows. Heater off. Air thinned. He felt the temperature change through the glove more than he heard it.

The dark between bays stayed dark because they'd chosen dark. No one turned a headlamp on. LED lenses made small heat that didn't matter much by numbers, but light changed how people moved. Movement made sound. Sound coupled into wood and slab and then into soil. He had said it enough. Stillness kept vibration out of the slab.

He measured spaces rather than looking at them. From his beam to the cross-beam above the shower bay: twenty-three inches, two knuckle-widths past a handspan. From that cross-beam to the panel opening: a crawl with elbows and hips flat, two joists per off-window. He tested the tolerance with a slow slide, glove fabric rasping a millimeter against wood. He stopped before the rasp turned into a noise a hanger could conduct.

Maya kept her cheek to the beam. She had her mouth inside her collar, the knit shining with frost where her breath had condensed earlier and then gone dry. Her hand rested on the belt loop that held the injured sawyer across the shower bay. The belt was pitched over the beam so the man's weight stayed in a shallow cradle. He had not spoken since the last cycle except for one harsh exhale that died before it became a word.

"We take the back hall," Warren said, no louder than he needed to be for the short distance between them. "No exterior wall contact. Door to

the courtyard only. Greenhouse lee. Office first. Then we move in the greenhouse's wind-shadow to the depot."

He laid it out in angles. The back hall moved them perpendicular to the main slab control joints. The courtyard door faced into a small rectangle where drifts had built in the wind eddy. The greenhouse glass along the north wall rose from a low stem wall and put a smooth, cold surface between them and a big volume of air that would stay colder for the first few minutes of gray. The office sat attached to the greenhouse on the west. A metal door with a gasket. The depot sat lower than both, down the slight cross-slope where powder pooled.

"The flare," Maya said into her collar. She didn't lift her head. "We use it on the move. Not late. Ahead. You said it. Early and far. We throw if we have to at a change."

He thought in numbers. One flare left. The other had done what it needed at the generator until it burned down to a wet stump. He didn't look at the empty slot where a second would have been. "Inventory: one live flare. No split," he said. "We assign the device to you. You decide the throw and I keep the count. We don't have thirds of anything."

Maya reached a hand toward him and he slid the cylinder across the beam without letting it scrape a hanger. She tucked it between two layers at her waist under her jacket to keep its composition near ambient. Flares lit easier when they were not frozen. It would also make her a small and brief hotter source if it went off in the wrong place. They had already committed to that risk by carrying it.

Vince shifted on the beam three joists over. His breath rasped in his throat. "We go upslope," he whispered. "There's the repeater tower on the ridge. If we get to it, we can call for real help. County can bring a plow cat up from the east side. You don't have to," He stopped. He had been about to say burn.

Warren kept his face on the wood. "The tower only matters if you transmit to it. You heard the drains on one clack. You saw the crack grow.

Multiply that by engines, stamping feet, slamming doors, radio checks every ten seconds.” He let in one more beat for breath control. “You’ll send people into heated rooms where roots already map movement. They’ll freeze in their gear while the network traces every step they take.”

“They fix things,” Vince said. His voice came thin. He was still turned toward the opening two bays over where the grader operator hung in his jacket, anchored by cords that had taken the easiest paths. He kept turning toward that bay against instruction and then away again, unable to hold still.

“They fix paperwork,” Warren said. “The manifests list names and street addresses. A list of places with thermostats and gas fireplaces. That’s what the paper in the office is.” He paused. “You loaded fifty out before the road closed.”

“That’s not what this is,” Vince said too fast and then dropped his voice. “It’s freeze and nerves. We sit tight and get a window.”

“You heard it. The engine’s been steady. The only windows that come are the ones we choose.”

Warren kept his palm flat against the beam and counted one more cycle of the blower. He kept his eyes on the wood grain. “Office first. Greenhouse. We take paper and drives. We don’t keep boxes. We don’t carry weight. We light it and then we move to the depot. Fast ignition across multiple surfaces. We need a rapid fracture and draw, not gradual spread. Fracture, oxygen draw, collapse.” He eased his molars apart. “Glass will fail under heat shock. Delta T across thickness. Tensile stress at flaws.”

The injured sawyer made a sound behind his teeth. His eyes moved under lids and then opened a slit. He turned toward the hallway by a degree. That was all his belts allowed.

“Say it,” Maya said, low.

His speech came ragged. “Burn it...all.” It didn’t carry farther than the joist. The words cost him a small tremor that wobbled the belt and had to be corrected. He closed his eyes again.

Warren pressed the back of his glove against the beam until cold soaked his knuckles through. He kept to numbers. “Headlamps,” he said. “Red only. Lowest setting. Off unless needed for a lock or a latch. No sweeping beams. If the lens fogs, keep it outside a jacket so it stays cold. Battery packs close to skin only if we have to.”

Maya touched the lamp shell on her head and then removed her hand before friction against knit could carry. The red lens was taped into place with a dull strip to stop shine.

Vince edged forward and put a shoulder into the panel opening, a block in the crawl path. “No one is burning anything,” he said. “We need the records. For the insurance.” He shifted a knee to hold the position and his jacket brushed a hanger. Warren lifted two fingers: stop. Heater on. He waited for the blower to cycle off again before he spoke.

“Move,” Warren said, quiet.

Vince’s hand hovered over his radio. The clip had already given them one hard tap that pushed drains into tapping earlier. He set two fingers on the radio body.

“Don’t,” Maya said.

He touched the push-to-talk bezel.

Maya slid to step past; Vince caught her forearm; she yanked free. She met Warren’s eyes; he gave a small head shake.

On the next off-window, Maya drew the short pry bar from Warren’s belt. She set her shoulder and held her breath for half a count, then set the flat just behind Vince’s ear. One controlled strike. Vince’s eyes lost focus, and he slumped against the beam.

Warren crouched without letting his knees hit and checked Vince’s carotid pulse. It was there. He watched for breath and saw the faint frost

at his nostrils. He counted one slow beat, then pointed to the belt. The man in the Navy coat slid his belt free and passed it over. He shifted back, eyes down, clearing the crawl path. Maya looped Vince's wrists and pulled the belt through a metal hanger so his hands rested against wood. If he woke and flailed, he would not fall into the floor.

"I'm sorry," Warren said, the sound the length of one count.

"Two cycles," he said to the others when the blower clicked on again. "We slide the injured an inch toward the showers again. Then we go."

He put two fingers down on the beam and lifted and set them to mark the count. The crew around him matched his small motion with breath holds and releases timed to the same intervals.

When the blower stopped again, they slid the sawyer another inch toward the shower bay until the belts rested more squarely on the cross-beam. The towel wedge at the pelvis stayed in place. The man made a small sound that he suppressed by biting down. The belt creaked once and then settled.

"Good," Warren said. It carried less than the width of a beam.

The generator tone stayed where it had been: steady. The heater's off-window stretched. Skin sensed that better than ears did. Warren set his palms and waited through one more cycle, storing the extension.

On the next off-window, he moved.

He went through the panel opening first because he could keep his tremor controlled if he was focused on weight transfer. Setting the back of his gloved hand on the top of the fiberboard grid, he felt for small vibration from below. Knee down, easing contact through cloth into metal and then tile. For two breaths he held to see if the tile jumped; it did not. Both boots went on tile in a line he had chosen from above, avoiding the hairline crack that had grown near the vending machine. He stayed small, hips level, to avoid scraping against wallboard.

"Clear," he said.

Maya fed down the loose end of one belt. He threaded it under a pipe run along the shower bay wall, a cold surface with less draw than the vent register in the mess hall. He braced the belt between two studs where a cut-out gave access to a shutoff valve that no one would touch. The belt made a guide and a wedge. It would keep the injured man from swinging if a tremor took his weight for a second. It would keep him in the coldest cavity they could give him.

The coffee-urn man came next on Warren's hand signal. He landed light, knees bent without a slap. He kept palms flat on the tile until he found balance. The woman in the red cap lowered without letting her boots scrape a grout ridge. The man in the Navy coat followed her. Each movement sat inside the heater's off-window. No one spoke unless necessary.

Warren moved into the back hall and put his hand to the drywall where a control joint ran. A fine flutter passed through it. He stayed away from the floor seam where the most white had appeared earlier and chose the interior wall line where the air was colder.

The back door had a metal bar with a latch. He timed the press to the relay click. The latch eased out of its keeper and he opened the door two fingers' width. Cold air slid along the jamb and across his eyelashes. Before the gradient could pull more from outside, he used the side of his boot to pack loose snow from the threshold into the jamb, a cold plug that flattened the difference. He opened farther, enough for a shoulder. A white tip probed to the packed line, left a wet mark on metal and sealant, and stopped at the colder boundary. He eased the metal to a human width.

They went out one at a time. Warren first. He stepped into snow that came to mid-calf. Powder bunched at his boot collars and filled the wrinkles just above his ankles. He kept his exhale inside his collar, redirected along his sternum, where it condensed and then dampened fabric. Exhale condensed into a visible plume warmer than ambient when it leaked; he kept it inside. He took the frost.

Maya came next with her mouth covered and the flare under her jacket. With her other hand she kept the empty cardboard tube from the spent one they had used at the generator. It put weight in her hand and reminded her there would be no second throw if she misread the window. Her muscles needed the weight.

The yard was covered in unbroken snow. Snow had laid over the slab and the ruts, muffling edges. But angles still showed where they mattered. The nearest planted block, the Planted Ten Vince had named, had its laterals angled. They were not random. The limbs on the sides that faced the bunkhouse and the shed mouth were pitched higher than those that faced the open. The line of the greenhouse looked darker than the yard, a wall of panes that had gone opaque under the storm. Where the greenhouse met the office wall, wind had scoured, leaving a low, thin drift.

Warren lifted a palm for stillness when a thin creak transmitted through the snow under the greenhouse eaves. It was wood and load. Movement changed how loads sat on surfaces. Loads changed sound. He waited through it.

“Cadence,” he said, low enough that it was a movement more than a word.

He raised his hand and lowered it, and on that cue they began to step. Five meters per off-window. It wasn’t measured by tape. He had practiced the spacing long enough that his body matched it. He made the distance in twelve slow steps with his boots placed flat. He found the existing low points in the snowpack and kept out of the places where wind had crusted the top into a hard bridge that would crack and carry sound farther.

Maya kept exactly five meters behind him. She carried the flare under her jacket and with her other hand held the empty cardboard tube. It put weight in her grip and kept her wrist quiet.

At the greenhouse corner he pointed to a place along the stem wall where snow had drifted shallow. It put them close to the panes without

contact. He saw a dim smear beneath frost where his body's heat changed the sheen a fraction. He kept his shoulders from touching the glass. Surfaces near him stayed cold. That was the whole goal. If he left no melt, there was less to read.

They reached the office door in two off-windows. The door had a push bar and a keyed lock. He touched the metal at the keyway with the back of his glove to sense how far from ambient it read. It was a degree warmer than the pane next to it. That could be warm air that had leaked through the seal and warmed the tumbler. He kept his pressure low and timed the bar press to the last count of the off-window the way he had at the back hall door.

The latch moved but the door did not open. Ice had set along the threshold under the lip. He put a shoulder into the metal on the next off-window. It gave a millimeter and then stuck. He pulled back. He kept air inside his collar. He put the side of his boot against the bottom edge and pressed to shear the thin ice interface under the sweep. The door moved another millimeter. He stopped again and waited because a creak had moved up the greenhouse frame.

Maya had her head tilted toward the yard where the planted rows began past the office wall. The nearest trunks had their laterals lifted on the office-facing sides. No twitching. No snapping. Just held angles. She shifted her stance to put her boots where his were, matching compressions in the snow. The coffee-urn man swallowed, hard enough to show above his collar.

On the third off-window, the latch moved cleanly and the door opened three inches. Warm air from the building's interior slid into the yard and made a thin fog in the crack. Warren shut it again. He and Maya both used their boots to push new snow into the jamb until the fog stopped. Then he opened it wider, enough for his shoulders.

He was about to step in when, along the office's interior corner where the wall met the sill, a white tip rose through a hairline separation and

pressed along the baseboard toward the opening. It left a wet smear that caught the light of the gray morning. He kicked the jamb again with a measured push to drive loose powder into the base seam too. Condensation disappeared. The tip stopped at the powder line, held, then eased back a fraction.

“This comes fast,” Maya said. She didn’t mean the tip. She meant their window would not stay open.

“Office, then greenhouse survey,” he said. “No sorting. No reading. We confirm targets and get out.”

She held up the flare without moving her arm from her side to ask if she should pitch it now. He shook his head once. “Early and far only if we need a pull,” he said. “Not here.”

She tucked the flare back under her jacket and followed him into the office.

Inside, the air read warmer than the yard by a degree, maybe two. The building had bled heat all night, flattening gradients. A desk sat under a window that had iced over inside from humidity. A stack of binders sat on the credenza. Printed manifests lay in a tray with glossy black-and-silver crest tags stapled to corners. The top sheet showed VIP Premium above a city address block. A printer blinked a dead light. A steel file cabinet stood against the interior wall with a lock barrel above the top drawer; a key sat in it. The drawer handles had a thin rim where moisture had refrozen along the underside. Under the monitor on the desk, two portable drives with cables coiled near them, labels in marker that read Drive A and Drive B. He didn’t touch any of it. He counted locations.

“Seed,” Maya said, already looking through the inner door to the greenhouse.

“In there,” he said. “We don’t smash panes. We raise the temperature difference fast. We heat cold glass everywhere at once if we can. The panes will crack and release and the pressure change will do the rest.

That's later." He looked through the door at racks under frost where seed trays and labeled envelopes had sat when they were still a farm.

She nodded once.

They kept to the same count and moved through the inner door for a quick pass. The greenhouse held dark shapes and flat cold. The glass had swirled with ice where the storm made it sweat and then freeze. Racks ran in rows. Poly trays were empty; some had a rind of frozen damp from old soil that had been washed out. Masking tape labels on the risers read 7C and 8B; the ink had bled and then set. Ice crust sat around bolt heads along a frame joint, and a run of irrigation hose lay rigid and flattened with frozen water trapped inside. He noted pane seams he could reach again and the runs where paper would sit under glass when it was time. No contact now. No placement. No ignition. There was no heater in this building, but he kept the count.

"We wipe the labels when we come back," Maya said, low.

"Yes," he said. "On the way out, not now."

They withdrew to the office and back into the yard on his count. The flare stayed unlit in Maya's jacket.

They crossed to the edge of the greenhouse and turned into the lee that led to the depot. He chose the low ground because it damped sound and shrank their apparent height against the facility mass. He had already taken their bodies out of that box. If they had stayed, any interior draw would have mapped them.

They moved. Five meters. Hold. Five meters. Hold.

Warren kept count in sixes and eights to regulate his own breath. He let the exhale leak along his collarbone. He kept his boots from bridging crust. His hands stayed close to his ribs. He looked at the planted lines past the corner of his eye without turning his head. The nearest laterals now faced two directions: toward residual heat at the bunkhouse and toward the greenhouse mass. It wasn't a choice. It was response. He used

the lower pressure zone along the greenhouse wall.

Past the greenhouse, the depot sat lower, tires of the tanker half-buried in snow. Dunes of powder had canted against the tank's lower wall. Wind had eddied there and filled the space in a way that would hide their movement if they stayed slow.

"Count," he said in the same low voice he'd been using for hours.

Maya counted with him. Her voice carried as little as a breath and still linked to his measure. She kept the flare unlit and ready. She watched Warren's boots and matched his spacing. She did not look toward the planted rows. She didn't need to. He would tell her when to throw. If he didn't, she would do it without him. They had said as much in the rafters.

They moved along the edge of the low ground, headed toward a point that would let them peel to the depot or step back above it and into the office again if they had misread the yard. They did not speak intention. They marked snow with shallow compressions that did not bridge into creaks.

Warren felt his own fingers start to lose feeling at the tips. Cold narrowed the tremor in his hands to something that stayed inside him rather than transmitting into the world. He used that. He had used one kind of control before and it had killed a young tech. He would not name that out here. He would keep count.

He watched the tanker through snowfall and then the planted line beyond it. The nearest limbs faced their way; not turning. Angles held. Every time he and Maya moved five meters, a small subset of those angles sharpened a degree and then returned a fraction when they held still. That was enough.

He lifted his hand for one more hold and set it down on the snow. His glove came away wet. He did not wipe it.

"Next window," he said, "we hit the depot edge and stop short. We use the flare only if the line moves in faster than the lee buys us."

Maya nodded once. He saw it in the corner of his eye. She had the flare steady, small heat sealed at her hip.

They took the next set of steps and the space changed where the ground fell away into deeper powder. Sound shortened. Their boots went down with less return. Even breathing felt different with damped reflection from the building's wall. He put his palm on the tanker's cold steel surface for a second to test how it conducted their heat. It took little. The steel drew heat from his glove on contact. The tank would take a lot to raise. He noted it for later.

"Hold," he said.

They kept still with knees unlocked and took up less space than they could have. Warren kept his face inside his collar. He kept his eyes open without blinking more than he needed to keep the film moving. Limb angles changed in patterns tied to what he knew and what he could measure. Roots in drains tested cracks. Mycorrhizae in soil reacted to shear. Signals propagated. The system did what it was built to do when given the gradients to read.

He raised his hand and lowered it. They moved again.

The heater back in the bunkhouse would cycle whether he stood here or not. The generator's tone had not dipped in hours. He had wanted that dip. He set a gloved fingertip to the tanker seam and waited for any tremor; there was none. He reset his count to the blower cadence.

They moved along the tanker's shadow and kept their feet out of the hard crust. They kept moving on the count into ground where hyphae under the slab and in the soil detected only their reduced pressure and heat. The flare stayed unthrown in one gloved hand and glass stayed intact behind them. They held the sequence and moved. Frost filmed the gauge face on the tank; numbers were visible through it. "Gauge, then valve," he whispered.

Chapter 9

The Gauntlet

They had wedged the injured sawyer in the shower bay's cold cavity, belts tight, his weight tied off. Maya pressed her glove to his shoulder and whispered, "We'll come back if we make it." Warren nodded once.

Back under the joists, she had pulled the battery from Vince's handheld and slid it into her pocket. The plastic had made a faint tap against a zipper pull and then stilled at her hip. The radio without its pack was just weight and a switch. No chirp would cut a room and throw a pressure spike into the slab.

Frost filmed the gauge face on the tank ahead; numbers sat under it. "Gauge, then valve," he had said. They held in the depot lee, faces tucked into collars to blunt breath fog.

Warren traced a line in the powder toward the depot corner, a shallow arc along the low ground. He raised his hand and gave the count in a whisper synced to the heater's off-window: six in, hold; eight out, hold; step on the silent two between. Maya nodded and matched him. They would not land feet together.

At the corner, he pressed a fist of snow into a ball and sent it underhand into the alley beyond the depot angle. It landed without a slap. He kept his eyes open and watched the nearest laterals he could see without turning his head. Frost along one thick twig trembled slightly from the impact's air shift and stopped. No angle change that tracked them. The count was working. He let the cold under his soles sink through rubber to bone.

Wood noise from the bunkhouse direction came as a pop and a small shift, the kind that happens when load distribution changes on a frame. No drain covers rang. No new crack line showed at the base of the greenhouse wall. The rule held while they stayed small and cold.

Warren kept his finger on the powder line until the off-window stretched enough to give them twelve slow steps. He tested his hand for tremor. The cold kept it inside the glove instead of broadcasting it. Standing with his feet set along the line he had drawn, he waited for the relay's change he could feel at his eyebrows, a small difference he had learned to catch there as well as by the thermostat.

"Count," he whispered.

Maya repeated it, mouth under her collar. She kept her voice close to the fabric. She held a folded shop rag in her left hand. Under her jacket at her waist, the live flare sat sealed and dry. They had agreed to hold their only one for the perimeter.

They moved on the stop. Flat feet. No twist. The powder rose at their shins and fell without a roll. Each landing matched the end of an exhale so the warm plume left their mouths when their soles had already loaded the snow. Step, breath, stillness.

On the next stop, he slid his hand in under her jacket hem. She passed him the radio battery and the rag. He teased out a fringe of fibers, cupped them from wind, and touched the battery contacts to her metal zipper tab. A bright arc snapped. The fibers darkened, then caught. He fed the small flame into the rag with a tight breath and a second arc. He kept the contact brief to avoid cooking the cell. It took. He brought his arm back and threw the burning cloth low, left of the depot angle and two alleys out. It dug into the drift and melted a cavity where it lay. Orange steadied. The smell off it was hot resin and a dry mineral note.

They watched without turning their heads fully. Nearest laterals shifted by degrees toward that new source. It happened in small pulses with rests between. A trunk farther out in the block showed white around

its needles where ice had rimed and held; it tilted lateral sets in a quiet echo but lagged. Heat set priority, not proximity. Warren counted breaths and steps the decoy allowed.

"Go," he said at the exact end of a hold.

They waded. The drift depth rose to mid-thigh in a low pocket and then dropped to the shin at the edge of a scoured strip. Warren placed his footfalls where the snow had fallen soft and thick rather than where wind-crust made a bridge that would crack. Maya matched his path five meters and one heartbeat behind. They did not allow themselves to step in tandem; he set, then she set, then both held. His thighs burned. He would name the strain later.

A half-frozen Titan on their right tipped its lateral crown toward the burn. Needles lifted by degrees along the nodes. A signal moved along the gradient his skin read before his eye did. The twigs carried thin rime that crackled away in places and clung in others. The tree responded to stress and temperature. He kept the count.

Maya's boot caught. Her toe hit buried slash, and her ankle stuck on a splintered ridge left from some fall pass with the loader. She started forward and then checked the fall.

"Hold," Warren said in the same voice he used for the count. He didn't add anything.

He counted the blower's tail into silence and held her in that bow, one knee down in powder, arms close to limit heat. In their periphery, two nearer laterals moved a fraction, testing. He waited through three breaths, long down, long up. Her thigh shook against denim once, then settled as she pressed her mouth into her sleeve to keep warm air close. When the angles loosened back toward the burn, he tapped twice on his thigh. She pulled her foot free along the angle it had entered and set it flat, slow, into a safer hollow.

They moved again and passed the loader they had idled hours before. Metal held a temperature difference a long time; less than an engine

block, more than wood and ice. Frost lay on the seat and the hydraulic arms, but under the control cluster the plastic sat a fraction above the ambient air where it had been out of the wind. Branches near the loader tipped toward it faintly. That extra warmth lengthened the next two holds by a couple of counts. He used both to study the yard lines east and the way the left alley's branches continued to track the burn.

The rag's color deepened and spit. A gust came up and almost snuffed it. Warren lifted his forearm to cover his face and tucked his mouth deeper to hold heat in. He shortened the count without rushing. He kept the edges of his steps where the snow compressed without cracking. "Three shorter," he said for Maya. She answered by matching his movements. Rags burned short and pulled less than a flare; draw on the limbs dropped sooner.

He looked to the right side of their corridor. A line deeper in the block retained interest in the left burn but not enough to guarantee their safety if they had to cross that space. He needed a second lure even if it lived only for a few breaths. He had no second flare. They had agreed to hold their only one for the perimeter. He looked at Maya's jacket where oil had left a dark patch from weeks around engines.

"Cloth," he said.

She understood. She pulled another folded strip of shop rag from inside her coveralls. Resin soaked everything they wore this week: the strings they cut, the gloves they washed in the sink with cold water, the cuffs of sleeves.

"Count," he said, and on the next hold he stepped a half pace off his line, reached the rag with two fingers, leaned to the side to catch a flame off the left lure's dying edge onto the rag's corner, and brought it back toward him with a careful arc. He threw the new burn low and right into a different alley. The smell came up immediate. The rag sputtered and then guttered, but it made a bright shape for a handful of breaths. The nearest right-hand laterals checked toward it, opening a gap of roughly a meter;

he counted two breaths before that bias would ease.

They moved on that little window. The cold under Warren's boots worked in their favor. Fingers had gone numb, which meant his tremor did not carry into the world around him. He marked the angles, the loader, the diminishing left glow, the new small right flicker, and his line to the depot wall.

He sensed a change at his left as the first rag got down to a coal inside its melt. He saw the moment its brightest part went away and left only a little red. In the next stop he opened only the words he needed.

"Main," he said, and then, "Watch."

In front of them, the pattern of angles changed again, not toward the left burn and not toward them. Four trees along a shallow diagonal held their needles up in a way that lined with an unseen run below the snow. Snow along that line met the trunks differently: smooth dimples where powder had settled, and at regular distances a slight whitening at the surface where air had come up from a crack in the soil crust and frost had formed differently there.

"Buried pipe," Warren said under his breath. "Water or fire service. Residual thermal mass. Hyphae on the bedding sense shear when load shifts. We don't step on that line." He touched her wrist twice and pointed with a gloved knuckle to a colder path that would arc around the suspect line and add distance.

She gave a single nod and set her foot to match his new vector. He kept his gaze level and studied the ground for small depressions that kept the pattern. The cold sat even across, but any warmth held by water under the building's footprint would stack at contact points and carry into the soil in a pattern he could read if he stayed patient.

A white tip rose through the powder near his left boot and tested the air just above the surface. He held. He eased the weight in his foot into the shin and then into the thigh without moving the sole. He felt the long pull of blood under wool and slowed it for a count. The tip found the side

of the boot, touched rubber with its blunt end, and waited. His boot sole cooled, the difference between him and snow falling by fractions. The tip eased back. He lifted his foot without scraping, clearing the surface by half an inch, and set it forward five inches into a hollow. His chest compressed from the held exhale. He took another with the same timed discipline.

Maya touched the edge of the loader's bucket and pointed low to the depot's roof line, barely seen in gray. She put her knee down in powder, and he did the same behind the loader to bring their radiated heat down and cut line of sight from the open lanes. They listened. Metal rose on his tongue. He put his forearm to his lip to keep warmer air from leaving there.

The left ember died. Yard noise stayed the same: wind on their coats, a tiny icy slide off a pane seam, the steady distant generator. Angles out along the left-most row began to return toward the depot side. He could measure their window by how far those angles came back toward where he and Maya knelt.

He needed ignition at the depot perimeter later without creating a target now. He tapped the flare under Maya's jacket with a gloved finger. Sealed. Dry. He kept it in mind and watched the decoy glow contract to dull red, then go black.

They moved again. Soft steps out from the loader's cover into an open view of the depot. The tanker sat nose-down in a drift where the yard dropped a foot. Powder had built against the tires on this side and collapsed in waves against the far wall. The fuel shed's door stood across open ground they would have to cross. The wind's earlier gust had moved spindrift along the base and drawn lines they could follow.

Warren lifted his head a bare amount and took in what he could not change: the open space between them and that door; the pipe run line they would have to avoid; the change in branch angles behind them now that their decoys had gone dark. He did not name any of it aloud.

"Depot in sight," he said quietly to give Maya the sound she needed to mark the next set of tasks without using more words than necessary.

Chapter 10

Fuel Source

Snow at the depot edge sat in shapes cut by wind and wall. The tanker blocked the worst of it but not the cold. Warren kept his face inside his collar and counted the heater's duty cycle in the bunkhouse by the change he felt at his eyebrows. The relay ticked through the buildings behind them, the blower slowed, and activity dropped across the yard in practical terms: fewer moving bodies, fewer warm plumes. They had a window.

He and Maya moved on that long off-state. Flat feet. No twist. A breath contained in cloth and hair. The tanker sat nose-down in a drift where the apron dropped. Powder stacked against the far wall in waves. Rear duals had melted down then frozen into a shallow rut. The cab faced the planted ten, nose aligned toward the rows and the river. No person took a breath in the open while standing still. Frost on the gauge face held its numbers under a thin skin.

"Rear's in," he said. He kept it low. He didn't name all of it. He made the pictures in his head line up with what the world offered: tire depth, angle of approach, buried pipe signaled by the shallow dimples of snow meeting trunks in a repeating pattern and by the periodic whitening where air had moved out of soil cracks and frozen on the surface. That line ran within ten feet of the fuel shed door, diagonaling toward the planted block.

Maya nodded. Her eyes tracked where he pointed with a knuckle. She rolled a shoulder against the cold. Resin odor was stronger in the lee, with a metallic note. Everything he needed to do would take that odor toward ignition.

He held his glove above the gauge and waited for any fog to betray a temperature difference. There was none. The face kept its frost. On the frame, Christmas-tree farm paint chalked off under fingers and came away as powder trapped in glove fabric. He pulled his hand back and returned to the count.

“Plant the lure,” Maya said. She did not take her eyes off the planted rows. The nearest limbs faced them and the bunkhouse. Angles held. Hands stayed close to ribs. Breath leaked through collars.

He reached under Maya’s jacket hem. The paper-wrapped cylinder sat sealed and dry against her waist. He took it and moved to the loader shadow they had used minutes before. The count anchored his legs. He kept his boots out of bridges that would crack. At the far stop, he tore the cap and struck. The compound went from dark to bright. The flare produced a dense, immediate heat. He held it low, then threw it two alleys back along a line that would pull the nearest laterals behind them and away from the cab. It landed in powder and melted a cavity. Heat deepened the melt pocket and lit the powder around it. The smell went from resin to hot copper.

They watched angles. No words. The nearest row tipped in discrete increments. Farther out, a lagging echo ran through a diagonal across the block. He had watched that ranking through each blower cycle: strong heat over distance. He let the count reset while the blower stayed off.

“Valve stack,” Maya said. She had already moved low and steady along the tank’s side. She kept knees bent to shrink her profile and keep her soles flat. At the rear manifold she brushed snow away with her sleeve, careful not to slap. A sight glass darkened with sludge moved slow under frost. The needle behind the gauge face sat over the halfway hash, right of center. She tapped the face gently and waited. No flick. She looked back and held up two gloved fingers to show more than half. He didn’t correct the interpretation; more than half was what he needed.

“Cold-stiff,” she said of the valves, eyes on the stem nuts. “Not fractured.”

He shifted his weight and moved on his own set. In the lee under the cab door he put two fingers on the latch and squeezed. Metal complained in a high, sharp band. He opened a hand-width, then stopped because he felt a micro-tremor in the powder at his boot. He shut the door to the catch and stilled. Out past the tanker, two lines toward the flare tightened a degree. The decoy held their interest. He waited until those angles returned toward the lure by that same degree. He let blood cool in his hands. Numb crept in at the fingertips; his pulse eased.

“Buried run,” he said. He pointed along the diagonal from the shed to the planted block. “Pipe bedding. Hyphae there will pick up shear. No step.”

Maya kept her voice low. “Angle around it.” She matched his vector by a fraction of a foot, enough to avoid contact and to keep her weight off the bedding line. The snow surface whitened differently in place after a crack vented subsurface air; it formed a thin shell. Stepping there would collapse the shell and tell the network where they were. They stayed off it.

The decoy burned down two alleys back. Resin in the air thickened a notch. The nearest laterals stayed on it. He needed a margin behind him before opening the cab. He watched, counted. When a far branch returned a fraction toward the loader because the decoy had consumed some of itself and dimmed by that much, he marked that loss as time.

Maya went to the cab first. She kept her boots in the hollows he had made when he had moved the last time. She opened the door on his hand signal, two inches only. She had timed this pull on the pocket to the blower’s off-window. Her hand went under the seat and into the door pocket. She came out with a plastic sleeve and a metal tube with a red cap.

“Truck kit,” she said. She dropped to one knee and slid the packaging toward him, then pulled a second tube from the pocket. “Two. Cold.” She

set both tubes on the snow beside her and pressed them down so they would sit at ambient, not pocket warm. She kept them sealed. The mess-hall flare had been the only live one they'd carried in; the truck kit held two unused road flares they'd just found, both cold.

He made a small exhale into his collar and felt the moisture collect there. He had argued to save the mess-hall flare for the perimeter. Using it here had bought them the only clearing they would have at the cab. The truck's own flares would be staged for a surge. He took one and slipped it under the top step where he could reach it without reaching across space.

"Chain it?" Warren whispered.

"No. Rear duals are glued. Pipe bedding picks up shear," Maya said.

They held still. The loader sat back under a fainter warmth that had drawn angles when their first rag had burned in the last move, and even that had lengthened holds. Hooking up chain would take minutes they did not have. Dragging would broadcast shear across slab and soil and wall.

"In place," he said.

"Yeah," Maya said. "We make it happen right here."

They did a minute of nothing because nothing kept them small. White tips tested the surface near the pipe line beyond the depot wall but stayed under snow on the far side of his no-step corridor. He saw one blunt end touch powder and map pressure two inches from the surface; the weight field registered and then resolved against the decoy's heat. It went still at the surface and then withdrew the width of a nail.

He put his hand on the cab handle again and opened it more slowly than before, half of an inch at a time. Metal slid across steel. He kept motion steady to prevent the tiny start-stop jerks that would transmit through body and chassis. The interior air hit his face: diesel vapor locked in cold, plastic odor from the dash. No fog. He sat on the threshold with one knee in snow and the other foot on the step, position low.

Maya stayed at the valves and ran gloved fingers across a bolt to flake ice from a seam. She steadied her hand with fingers from the other glove and checked her breathing by the motion of her shoulders under Carhartt cloth. No headlamp. No scratching of fabric.

“Count,” Warren said. They kept the cycle in mind, although the engine behind them did not change. The decoy’s brightness dropped. Needles along a distant row returned by a half-degree toward their position, then held. He let the last length of orange burn to a steady coal. He would want the next lure later, if there was a later. He tapped the top step where the truck flares waited within reach.

They breathed and watched angles until minute-level changes confirmed the decoy remained the stronger signal. Hands and faces went dull at the skin. Blood flow slowed; their radiated profile dropped. The pressure they put into the snow remained within the band he could accept: slow load and slow unload, no sudden edges.

“Ready,” Maya said. “Valve turns slow. It turns.”

He slid further into the cab. A scrim of frost sat on the inside of the windshield at the corners where the defroster would never reach if it ran. The seat was firm and cold. He did not touch the wheel. He did not reach for the key. He checked the park brake with two fingers, barely moving the handle. It sat notched; cables would be stiff. He left it engaged. He touched the hazard switch to test play. The button moved with expected resistance and returned; no power without ignition.

He leaned out to tell Maya but stopped because the blower back at the bunkhouse cut in. Air moved in that building. He felt it up his sleeve as a change along hair he had not shaved for days. He pressed himself smaller at the cab threshold. Out across the rows, a fraction of angle returned toward the bunkhouse flue, then held between it and the decoy. Angles split between those sources; a smaller plume rose under the office roof line.

Maya pulled the wrench she had tucked under the tank's skid rail and set it beside the valve stem. She did not put it on yet. Tools conducted heat from hands to metal. Metal conducted heat into snow. The network had more than one sense.

"Wait," he said. "Let the blower end." He kept it tight. When the blower slid down and the alley angles returned toward the decoy a fraction more, he opened the door the rest of the way with the same smooth motion as before. It made sound again but not the sharp band from earlier. New contact points had iced and now moved against each other. He adjusted his exhale to end every time the shelf of his boot took a bit more weight.

He pulled a metal box from the cab floor with a gloved hand. Bark dust and resin flecks from months of use had settled around it. The box had printed letters worn by boots. He set it in the snow and snapped the latch. Inside lay two triangles and a third, shorter flare, expired by the date on its label. He closed the lid and put that flare back because a misfire would cost them more time than it bought. He slid the triangles aside, not needed. He had what he needed already.

"Those two from the door pocket," Maya said. "Enough for surge." She set them, still sealed, where her hand could find them without a search.

The decoy's cavity widened in the drift. Orange gave steady heat. Powder above it slumped as water in the surface crystals drained down. Angles across the alley nearest it held. He kept his chest muscles still while the next breath left his skin through cloth. He let nothing extra move.

"We use it here," he said again, to close the decision tree in his head. "No chaining."

"Then make it fast," Maya said. "Fast and smooth."

They shifted position two body-lengths. The tanker's mass on one side and the shed wall on the other played with echoes. He avoided the

pipe-bedding diagonal by the same margin as before. Close up, the rear duals showed a glaze at the rubber-snow contact, a thin film that had formed and refrozen with a clean edge around the depression. He put a knuckle to it and tapped very lightly. The surface did not ring; it had no cavity. It would not give easily. They were not moving this rig by pulling.

“Rear wheels are glued in,” Maya said, using the yard’s word for that condition. She didn’t touch them. She read them by eye, by the look of the ice at the joint, not by hand. He had worked with people who pounded on problems to get a feel for them. That was finished here. Percussion damped fast across the rows.

He tilted his head and tasted the cab again: cold diesel and plastic and oil. It anchored the plan in his head. The cab carried a flashlight and a frayed parka on the passenger seat. A coffee cup at the base of the shifter had a ring of resin dust at its lip. No one would drink from that. The heater vents folded shut. The dash sat dead. The key, if left, would be in the cluster, but he didn’t reach for it.

“Valve’s in good shape,” Maya said. “Stems slow. No cracks. Needle shows over half.” She brushed her glove against the gauge surround and left a streak in the frost. “Cold has locked the gaskets out here. That helps us. It will stall draw for seconds until flow warms the interface.”

He nodded once. “We use delta T to fracture the glass at the greenhouse,” he said, because the plan had to sit in both their heads in the same order. “Here, we open, vent, and control draw. We do not want a slow warm up. Steep gradient, then ignition to prevent routing.” He kept his mouth on the words. He didn’t need volume. “We light off only when the field shows a gap. The flare goes far and early again.”

“Loader is down there,” Maya said, chin tipped toward the crouch spot they’d used before. “We’re not hanging chain.”

“Agreed.”

He looked east and west and gauged right-of-way. Spindrift stringers on the ground marked where gusts had moved earlier. The flare beyond

them hissed and settled a fraction deeper into its pocket, still strong enough to draw.

A sound carried across the yard. Not a radio. Not the generator. A human voice cut down by cloth. Both of them locked joints and held breath.

He must have woken and worked the belt loose, then timed his drop for when the blower went quiet. He'd have tracked their shallow prints from the back hall to the yard.

"Hey!" The word flattened in mitten. "You can't, "

Vince came into view with his arms close to his sides and his wrists chafed where a belt had been. The belt hung from one hand as a strip of leather. He followed shallow compressions in the snow where Warren and Maya had stepped. It did not take a tracker to do that. It took appetite and fear and a mind narrowed to a single vector. Frost had rimed his mustache and eyebrows. His face carried the red of a man who had moved in cold past the smart part of his reserve. He swayed and corrected the sway by planting his boot flat. He kept doing it from muscle memory. Even so, he got across the open without triggering a breach in the immediate ground near the shed wall. The decoy helped him more than his own discipline.

"Shit," she whispered. "Don't," Maya said. The word slid out and froze in the quiet between blower cycles.

Vince made a sound that had the shape of a laugh and the pressure of a cough. "I'll get us out," he said. "We drive." He lifted his chin at the cab door and reached toward it. "Road's gotta be plowed by now. State doesn't leave it shut this long." His jaw set; his fingers flexed on empty air as if a key should already be there. Steam blew from his nostrils.

Warren reached an arm out, palm down. Not a stop. He extended it and held the plane of his hand without adding load. He did not step. He did not add weight into soil or slab. "Vince," he said, quieter than the other man's breath. "The rig is stuck. Even if it weren't, engine heat will

pull everything here. All rows. The network reads heat and shear through the pipe bedding. You're proposing to pull a loud, hot object across the bedding line and into the block."

Vince didn't even look at the pipe line. He kept his eyes on the wheel. "Keys?" His hand cut the air and kept moving. He put a knee on the step and reached for the grab bar. Snow fell off his pant cuff and landed on the step and slid into crystals that compressed and then held. He pulled his body into the cab until his torso lay across the seat. He moved with the practice of years in machines.

"Vince," Maya said. Her voice had color Warren hadn't heard from her all night. "You touch that key and you make us the strongest signal in the grove."

Vince blew out steam. "They fix things," he said. "We get down the switchbacks. I radio from the bend. Plow comes back. Bring a cat up from the east. They do it all the time."

Warren kept it plain. "The heater blower clicks on and limbs raise at the register. The baler spat a jam and branches narrowed the alley by a degree on each cycle. The generator ran and Titans formed around the casing in a ring. Same input, same response."

Vince didn't answer any of that. He found the key on the dash and curled a hand around it. He twisted in the seat, half up, half in. He looked down once at Warren and snarled a word that wasn't a word. Then he turned the key.

Maya's head snapped toward him, eyes wide. "Don't, "

The starter ground. The sound rolled under steel and snow and the windless yard. It added a band of energy across frequencies that the grove could read in both pressure and heat. It clicked once and then caught. The engine settled at a fast idle on cold start. Sound and heat built together. Air moved out of the dash vents and touched Warren's face as a thin, warm current; it banked along the steering column and the glass. Frost at the bottom corners of the windshield drew back by about 3

millimeters. Three breaths later, far rows began to turn. Powder slid off a rank and pattered onto the crust.

Warren felt it in his mouth. In the framework of his teeth. The air warmed by steps so small that a body couldn't name them. He moved.

He went up the step and into the doorway with one hand checked on the jamb. He kept his other hand low, ready for the key. Maya turned from the valve stack with her hand hovering over the nearest of the cold flares she had set in the snow. She didn't light it. Lighting it near the tall heat they had just created would add signal to signal. Her mouth went hard.

Vince swore and batted at Warren's arm. The bat had panic in it, not aim. It hit sleeve and air. He rocked half an inch and steadied without adding a second motion. He didn't have any more margin to burn.

"Key," Warren said. "Off." He kept his voice dead calm. His hand slid toward the column. In the corner of his eye he watched the far block. Not the near one, the far one. That was how you measured pull. The nearest limbs went to the strongest source and told you nothing a second ahead of need. The far limbs told you what was coming if you read them. He did. The far block showed movement.

The planted flare two alleys back dimmed further. Orange dulled. The cavity widened. Angles continued to hold toward it for one breath, then broke and turned in a slow sheet toward the tanker. Hundreds of feet away, frosted needles lifted in a shallow sequence along ranks they had not walked through. Snow slipped off tiny surfaces and fell in a fine noise.

"Jesus," Maya said.

Vince saw the angular change, or maybe he only saw Warren's face shift toward it. He shoved at the brake with his foot and pulled on the shift. Nothing moved. Cables were ice under the frame. He yanked and yanked. He made movement. He fed the system.

Warren slid his hand to the key and twisted it to off. The engine stumbled against a system that did not want to die. Spring pressure pushed back into his fingers. Forearm burn started and climbed. His hand shook once; he pinned the tremor with jaw and shoulder. He matched his breath to the count and held that pressure.

The idle fell. The warm air weakened by degrees. He kept pressure on the key. He did not let it spring back. He held it at that point where motion wanted to continue and could still be stopped.

“Don’t,” Vince said again. It meant stay out of my work. It meant leave my life alone.

“Engine off,” Warren said. “We’re not driving this. We’re using it.”

The idle dropped and then died. The cold rushed back in. Visible breath ceased to fog inside the cab after one long exhale. He kept the key held against the stop. Two breaths. Three. On the fourth breath, angles out on the far side stopped advancing and eased back by about half a degree toward the decoy.

Maya’s shoulders lowered a half-inch. She had not thrown the truck flares. She did not need to. The heater’s blower back at the bunkhouse would start up again any moment, and when it did, the grove would split attention between that roof and this set of bodies.

“Vince,” Warren said, still in that steady tone he used when control mattered. “You want out. So do we. Data says we don’t add a stronger signal than we can manage. We make a gradient steep where we choose and then we’re not there when it moves.”

Vince stared at him. He kept breathing fast. He yanked his hand free of the wheel and lunged again for the key. Warren still had it in off. Vince made a small sound and let go.

“Breathe into your collar,” Warren said, still looking out the windshield at the block. “Slow. You grew up in a cold yard. You know how to be small.”

The engine stayed dead. Angles toward the cab held more than they had before. The decoy behind was nearly gone. He would have to throw another. He would not use the truck flares yet. He had battery and rag again if he needed a short pull right now, far away. The oil on the rag would burn quick and hot even with the cold. He tapped his pocket and felt the battery through cloth. He held still instead because every choice pulled a price and they had no spare moves left.

He looked at Maya instead and saw the line of her back as she braced. He saw the small shiver at her right shoulder that she suppressed until it stopped. She put force on the stem again when he said two and did not otherwise move. He saw a drop of diesel form at a joint and go dull in air as it chilled. That was good. That told him volume inside would move if it needed to. It told him the tank would serve as source.

“Again,” he said. She went. The stem rotated another fraction.

A long scrape on the far side of the block cut across the snow field. Not a human drag. A branch realigning, a trunk shifting weight on frozen ground. A shift in angle. A shift in pressure. He felt it through the soles of his boots.

“Key stays off,” he said, and he held it.

The next breath left his mouth through cloth and stayed there. The next count came. Maya moved on it. Diesel made a tiny arc at the stem and then fell. She pulled her hand back to avoid contact. The smell edged up through the cold resin until it sat at the front of his mind. This was process.

“Fast, when it’s time,” Maya said. “We do not linger at any door.”

He nodded. The scene in his head moved through the office and into the greenhouse, then out again. He didn’t let it move to the tanker valve’s final position because the present still sat in the cab with Vince and the dead engine. Steps had to be taken in order.

A flare hiss receded in the back alley. Their margin shrank by that amount. He looked at the near flares Maya had set cold on the snow. They were sealed. Paper around the striker still tight. He recognized the brand from jobs on other lots. He knew their burn profile and the way a gust could steal them when they were first lit.

He turned his head. “Maya,” he said. “Hold.” He kept her at the stem for the next count, then took his battery out under his parka hem and looked for a strip of cloth on his own body that would serve without costing them the jacket later. He found the rag already in his pocket from the last move, oily, resin-stiff. He teased out a thread again and put the battery to the metal zipper of his parka. It arced and caught the rag. He leaned and tossed the small burn far to the right into an alley not yet fully engaged by the early decoy. Orange popped. The smell doubled. He did not watch the rag after it took. He watched the angles. They responded. He used that small window to give Maya two more turns before anything else could change.

Vince’s breath eased a notch as his body did what Warren had told him to do. He pulled his face down into his collar for a few seconds. He did not thank Warren for the instruction. Not needed. He kept the count.

“We’re close,” Maya said. “Stem almost there.”

“Keep it staged,” Warren said. “We don’t dump until we’re clear of the office and greenhouse.” He kept his voice soft. “Engine stays dead.” He didn’t look at Vince when he said it. He gave the other man no place to hook anger.

Vince rubbed his hand over his face and looked out over the hood toward the planted block. He saw what Warren had seen: the slow turn of branches in a range he couldn’t count. His mouth tightened. His eyes went wet. He blinked and the wet froze at the corners without falling. He looked down at his broken watch, and then he looked away from it. He didn’t check it again.

The rag burned down. The decoy behind them blackened to a coal and then to nothing at the bottom of its melt. The block took that information and changed angles by fractions in a dozen places. The heater in the bunkhouse would go off again any second. The blower's cadence had kept them alive long enough to stand here. It would keep them alive if they did not give it a louder voice to fight.

Warren set the decision in his head: control the vehicle by keeping it cold; use the tank by making the right heat at the right time. He had already moved from analysis to action. His arm on the key was proof. He would keep that arm there as long as the network would give him.

He took his hand off the key. A twitch ran up his forearm. He stepped down into the snow. He looked at Maya and nodded once. She pulled one of the truck flares into her hand. She didn't strike it. She set it back on the snow to keep it at ambient.

Engine stayed dead. They would use the tank without moving the rig.

Chapter 11

Combustion

The hit came as mass through laminated glass, an impact with no preamble. Radial cracks shot across the windshield in thin white lines, the polyvinyl interlayer held for half a second, then a fist-sized plug sloughed in with a dull snap. Snow dust and cold air entered. Resin odor lifted from bark torn against metal. The trunk's outer fissures carried pale sap that tack-wet the fracture edges.

Vince had one knee on the seat and one boot on the step, torso inside. His wrist twitched toward the key again out of habit or refusal. The cracked pane bowed further. A tapered white spear threaded through the punched hole, the tip wobbling once as it found alignment. It passed the steering wheel and entered Vince's chest a hand's width left of the sternum notch. Jacket fabric pushed in, parted, and the point went through with a wet pop. He blew steam across it, mouth open and eyes hard.

The spear sank until the roughened outer tissue hit cloth resistance at the back of the seat. Fibers in the bark grabbed upholstery weave. Vince's left hand still rested on the column, thumb crooked toward the key. His right hand rose to the root as if to pull it out and stopped halfway, fingers hovering. His breath came once, hard enough to carry condensation across the inside glass even with the cold. Then the root took over the rhythm his chest had carried.

It pulsed in short trains, two beats fast, one long, then the same again. With each contraction, a shallow ripple ran under the skin along the entry path. The plume from his mouth shrank. A red at the edges of the puncture turned brown in the cold air. Warren saw a thin ring of

white filaments lift at the wound margin and then lie flat again when his exhale disappeared inside his collar.

Maya's elbow rose. Steel showed in her hand, she saw a dark object against the gray. She checked mid-swing before the pull cord moved an inch. Her jaw set. Warren shook his head once. A start would add a wide-band vibration and a fast heat source within arm's reach of a dozen probing points he couldn't see. He didn't have a correction to give if she started it. He had a single sign: no.

Vince made a small noise in his throat. Not a word. He stared straight ahead at too□green needles beyond the spidered laminate. He tried to set his jaw a second time and it didn't hold. His mouth fell open and stayed open without steam. His hand loosened on the key. Knuckles lost color.

A new set of hair-thin tips appeared along the hole, moving with the air exchange through the fractured interlayer. They contacted the root shaft and the seat fabric and tracked along the softest surfaces. One touched Vince's exposed wrist above the glove and laid itself along a vein before it cooled and retracted. The trunk outside shifted weight with a dry, slow sound.

The key sat in Off from his last fight with it; no fan, only duct heat bleeding out. Vince's thumb moved reflex toward the key. Warren reached into the column, set his gloved fingers hard on the plastic, and kept it there. The slight blow□by from the vents collapsed to ambient. He held for two breaths to be sure nothing changed.

With the cab open to the weather, cold edged in. Resin and iron from blood mixed in the air. Vince's head tilted to the side, the angle held by the root shaft and the seat. His eyes stayed open. The whites clouded at the corners and then fixed. He didn't drop a line of last instructions or a complaint about the way of things. His body cooled in place.

Tips and laterals continued to test the cab seams. A needle cluster slid inside by the broken glass and touched the steering wheel rim. Another

brushed the rubber of a boot on the step, then slid off with no purchase. Warren stayed in the doorway and made sure his coat edge didn't rub the wheel where any warming would stay.

"Back out. Now," he said. His voice came low and steady. It didn't shake. His fingers shook when he gave them room. He didn't.

Maya looked once at Vince and once at the windshield. She put the saw down without sound, handle into the snow. They crossed to the tanker on the count, boot prints filling with powder as they made them. She slid her shoulder under the tank skirt line where the cold steel sucked heat out of her jacket and steadied her hands.

They moved on an off-cycle. A relay clicked in the bunkhouse. He counted six in and eight out with no lift or stomp and no step in tandem. They stayed inside the shallow depressions they had already made. They did not cross the diagonal where he had marked the buried pipe bedding in his head. The no-step corridor held.

At the rear manifold Maya brushed frost from the gauge again with the back of a glove. She didn't scrape. Numbers showed through a clear oval where her heat had briefly changed the pane earlier. The needle still sat right of center.

"On your count," she said.

"Quarter-turn, then wait for spread," he said.

He put the wrench onto the stem with care not to hand his heat into it for longer than necessary, rotated the valve by an eighth, met stiffness at the gasket, and moved another eighth. Diesel wet the metal edge and formed a bead that fell, hit packed snow, and flattened with a muted sound. A light tick came at the gasket. Subsequent beads fell at one-second intervals. The beads merged at the base into a dark runnel. The runnel advanced by capillarity and gravity down the shallow slope between the tank and the office threshold. The smell came up through their cloth. Heavy. Familiar from jobs that had nothing to do with burning.

He watched the edge of the flow touch a filled print from his earlier step and push into it. The print gave direction and broadened the line. The runnel moved under the surface crust in places and reappeared where the crust thinned. Warren scraped with the outer edge of his boot sole to add a shallow channel in the direction of the office door, no deeper than the thickness of his glove leather. He did not move his whole ankle to do it. He let the weight of his leg edge the trench.

“Delta T is our friend and our trap,” he said, keeping his mouth inside his collar. “When we light, gradients go steep. Everything mapped to the heater cycles will reweight to this. If they surge, you go to water. You stay in it until there’s no glow left.”

“I’m not leaving you here,” Maya said.

“You’re not leaving me,” he said. Her weight tipped back toward the office door for an instant. “You leave this heat source. You go to the river. Cold river water masks you. It drops your infrared to near background. Hyphae on that slope read shear. They don’t read through water the same. Fastest path that isn’t a straight line is down.”

She stared at him for one breath. She had frost on her beanie edge. She swung her gaze back to the runnel and nodded once, a small motion he felt in his chest more than he saw.

He moved to the office door. The push bar had frost at the seam where his glove had warmed it before. He pressed the bar when the relay clicked and opened the door three fingers’ width. Warm air from the office interior didn’t spill. The office sat only a degree or two above outside. He fed loose snow into the jamb with the side of his glove until air movement at the gap ceased, then pushed the door wider, enough for a shoulder and a hip.

A white tip rose along the baseboard seam at the inner wall, matching where he had seen a hairline separation earlier under the red light. It touched air, moved along the seam following a faint gradient, and stopped when the cold pulled back the faint warmth. He scuffed a narrow

groove with his boot sole across the threshold in one motion, keeping pressure even to avoid a jerk. Diesel from the runnel outside found the groove and darkened it. The tip at the baseboard contacted the darker seam. The tip lowered to it and held there, no retreat, no run forward. A second tip arrived from the drywall control joint inside. Paper at the desk made a small sound as its layers shifted with the door's motion.

He crossed the threshold on his count and kept his shoulders brushed to the colder interior wall. The desk sat under the window with a thin rind at the edges of the glass where sleet had stuck earlier, refrozen. He reached under the monitor and took Drive A and Drive B, left them out, and set both into the center of the desk before pulling the stack of printed manifests from the tray. The top sheet read VIP Premium over a block of addresses he did not sound out with his eyes. He dumped the stack in a loose pile, no tight roll that would smother combustion.

The file cabinet key sat in the lock. He turned it, opened the drawer two inches, and saw binders with crest tags stapled to corners. He didn't read spines. He pulled binders free in two grabs and laid them on the desk stack. Air moved across the papers when they settled and sent a fine papery sound that carried in the room. He kept still until that noise fell away into room temperature again.

He went back to the threshold and used his boot toe to deepen the diesel channel at the sill and just inside, connecting outer flow to inner baseboard. He dragged the toe once more with the same pressure, then stopped the second he felt a change through the sole that meant crust gave a hair more than his calculation allowed. No extra shear. He stepped back.

At the threshold seam, a white tip tapped at the liquid edge twice, a precise touch-and-hold consistent with chemical sampling. The second tip joined it at the surface. They both settled in contact with the darker patch. They didn't recoil. Hydrocarbon was not food. It was a source.

He looked once at Maya. She had her chin down into her collar. One of the truck flares sat in her glove. She passed it to him. The remaining sealed flare stayed under the step where she'd set it. He broke the plastic cap off with his thumb, checked the striker strip with his nail, and set the stick on the desk within reach. He didn't light yet. Outside again, he glanced at the flow line. The runnel wet the groove cleanly now, no overtopping. He leaned and breathed into his sleeve to hide the change in his own heat.

"When it goes, it goes fast," he said.

"I know," she said.

He let out one short breath.

"Straight through the lee. Greenhouse edge. Fence corner. Cut down the gully by the snag. You see the river, you don't slow. You get in. You keep your mouth shut until your head is under. Exhale through your nose only when you have to. Cold will take you in your hands first. Don't climb out until the glow is a memory and the wind carries no heat on your skin."

"You come with me," she said.

"My signature holds them here. Yours goes to water," he said.

Her eyes showed white around the edges for one second, then narrowed. She swallowed once and looked toward the ridge. As she turned to go, she scooped the under-step flare she'd staged and pulled her sleeve over her mouth; numbness had already started in her fingers.

Back inside, the baseboard seam showed damp dark past the doorway. The stack sat uneven; edges lifted at one corner. He grabbed the flare again. He held it pointed away from anything he didn't want to ignite. He dragged the tip down the striker with a decisive pull. At first contact, there was no spark. The second contact produced a white burst. The flare took. The first second burned at a higher temperature, a white burn that forced him to turn his face and close one eye. The stick settled into a steady red-orange with spit that dotted the desk.

Heat raised the glove surface temperature; skin under the web of his thumb tingled. He did not lift his hand from the flare until the burn stabilized. Hair-thin tips at the threshold jerked toward the heat within a small radius, fully within the room. They held there, thin ends lifted and not moving along the surface, only quivering at the boundary. He had a second of that picture, a clean view of behavior he could have written in a notebook. He didn't.

He dropped the flare into the diesel trace, not at the threshold but three inches inside the room. The hydrocarbon caught in an uneven front that filled the groove and bridged to the baseboard seam. The combustion front advanced along the diesel film ahead of blackening. The speed made sense with temperature: faster than crude, slower than gasoline. It moved with enough pace to reach the desk before oxygen depletion would stall it. The bottom sheets ignited first at their edges; the top delayed a half-second then took with a dry crackle.

He stepped back and kept his boot soles flat on the tile, no scrape. The corner of a manifest curled, showing the black-and-silver crest tag as it puckered and lost its shape. Letters in the address block deformed into unreadable arcs, then brown, then black, then dull gray. He took in that slide and fixed it: addresses burned away one by one. The drives lay in the center of the desk with plastic shells turning glossy before they sagged.

He turned his head at a prickle on his cheek. Glass at his shoulder went from opacity to a sudden shower. A lateral punched through the window from outside, the pane giving in a rectangle where flex had already tested the gasket. Needles on that limb were green and wet with melt from contact with glass. The cluster raked his jacket sleeve, snagged at a seam, and pulled him in a step. He rotated into the pull to give it less leverage and got his shoulder free by sliding along the entry angle of the needles, not against it. The jacket tore at the pocket. Cold air reached his skin along the rip and reduced muscle control; a tremor started in his forearm. He shook it down by flexing his hand once and then putting it flat to the wall for the count.

Outside, the gray opened a shade more. Through blown powder he saw Maya moving low, bent into the greenhouse lee. She stayed inside the depressions they had used to come this way and added length to the stride when the ground dropped under the edge of the frame. A Titan half-buried near the depot twisted its lateral set her direction by a few degrees and then stopped again with the cold in its tissues. The angle would shift faster as the fire warmed air. Flame was already moving along the groove.

He turned back to the desk and the threshold. Flame edges moved in lobes across the tile and into paper. The runnel outside still fed. Heat accumulated below the window and above the desk. Seals in the office's inner door to the greenhouse would experience strain in seconds. That was by design. When he looked at the baseboard seam again, more tips had arrived and were holding at the threshold of the flame line. The tips snapped toward the heat and held.

There was a path he could change. Not for himself. For her and for the people across the river grid with thermostats that would click on in a hundred rooms if anyone called for a mass recall. He didn't have to say it out loud to make it real. At the near block, a lateral set wavered between the thinning blur of Maya's heat and the lift from the office; he increased his own signature to resolve targeting. He stepped into the door line, where the heat increased his signature across the yard. At the near block, a trunk's lateral set rotated three degrees toward the doorway's plume; hair□tips along the threshold seam thickened.

A low pop sounded from outside the office wall. Wood cells changed phase under heat input. Sap near the surface thinned. Creaking progressed along the alley. He put his shoulder to the frame and felt the light change as the flames built. He held position until nearby laterals angled to him.

Behind him, paper fell into itself as structural bonds failed. Plastic cases on Drive A and Drive B moved from glossy to a soft corner collapse. Labels shriveled and blackened at the edges; the burn rose uneven, then

smoothed as air increased in the room. The resin-metal smell in the office doubled and added a new edge from melted insulation at the outlet strip. He heard nothing human in it, just reaction. He kept his breathing steady and close to his sleeve.

The heater relay at the bunkhouse clicked and held in the distance. The blower's on-cycle would divide the response pattern if it got a chance. The office burn started to replace it. That was acceptable.

He leaned out through the doorway to see past the greenhouse edge. A small dark figure moved against white at the ridge line. Maya hit the fence corner and turned downhill into the gully where the snag made a mark even under drift. She ran flat-footed and long. Another lateral in the near block shifted a few degrees toward the office and then toward her and then back toward the office as warm air from the door rolled out and up. He stood in the doorway long enough to present a hotter target and stepped one foot into the threshold where heat increased the temperature on exposed skin above his glove; a dull pressure sensation built. He held it for two seconds and then pulled his hand back inside the jacket cuff. The sensation stayed. That, too, was useful. He had to read his own heat now as part of the field.

Temperature rose along the inner side of the greenhouse wall. The seam sealant in the metal frame stiffened and then worked under strain. He heard it crunch quiet as the lower pane and mullion went through a small differential change. He checked the inner door seal and confirmed hinge throw. He still had to put the depot in play in a way that would not trap her on the slope.

He took one last scan of the desk, ran the sequence, and removed steps that no longer applied. Paper, gone. Drives, soft. Office, established as a source. He slid back to the jamb to keep his profile low and held himself there while the first tongues of flame rose to the window threshold and put new light across the snow.

He didn't speak. He stepped into the doorway heat. He placed his feet for the next count, turned his body toward the yard, and presented heat and motion to the only direction that mattered.

He marked the buried pipe in memory again before stepping. He would not cross it now. Set on the line he had scraped, shoulders to the wall, away from the weakness, he took in the smell of diesel now airborne and the copper trace that came when sap heated enough for aerosol to form around a cut. He noted them and stayed with the plan. He moved the way he had taught the rest to move, and then he stopped with exactness so the network could resolve on him as a target when he lit the larger part.

On the down-slope to the river, Maya hit a drift lip and rolled her left shoulder under to keep her thermal signature small. She popped up and slid into the gully out of his line. He didn't shift to try to find her again. He stayed where the office fire produced the brightest thermal plume in view.

He held still. And then, on the blower's far edge, he moved once more toward the depot in a line that made him the primary target for the grove.

Chapter 12

Scorched Earth

Snow drove in coarse bands against the office wall and smeared thin across the greenhouse panes. Warren kept his shoulder in the doorway seam where his torn sleeve leaked heat into the air. Paper collapsed on the desk behind him. Drive shells softened and lost form. The diesel groove along the baseboard burned as a narrow ribbon under a layer of soot that curled off and fell in bits.

He tested the greenhouse side with the short pry bar he'd taken from the office wall rack. The inner door had a steel edge and three hinges landing in a cold frame. He pressed his ear to the gap and listened for filament scrape and drain pull. The noise in there came from the pane joints. The metal expanded at different rates from the glass and sealant. A faint ping sounded at one corner pane, then at the opposite corner.

He lowered the bar into the hinge throw and eased. The leaf lifted a degree. Cold air from that side hit the heat of the office and slid across his face. He waited through two breaths, then pried again. The hinge pin rode a fraction. The seam widened to a little finger. The fire at the baseboard sent heat into the crack and drew smoke toward the colder space beyond.

"Draft improves rate," he said once, not at anyone, only to mark the choice in the air. "We want a corridor."

He timed the next motion to the end of an exhale and swung the inner door only enough to clear his shoulder. The greenhouse interior showed as darkness in a grid. Racks in rows. Poly trays filmed in ice. A black irrigation manifold ran low along the risers. No heater glow. No fan noise. The air carried frozen damp and old nutrient mix.

He stepped along the wall instead of the center lane. The soles of his boots set flat. The tile under his weight gave a small leaden sound at the racks closest to the office. He adjusted to keep that sound consistent rather than pulsed. The office light threw a pale band across plastic where water had frozen in a rough meniscus on tray lips.

At the end of the rack a levered louver unit sat at shoulder height in the end wall. A linkage bar ran from a gear head to slats under the pane. He took the short bar to the linkage and applied pressure without a jerk. The shaft resisted under rime and then gave. The first set of slats opened a hand's width. He waited for smoke movement to settle, then moved to the next and did the same. Above him, roof vents had manual handles you reached with a pole. He had no pole. He climbed a rack rung with his knees close to keep his body small and hooked the pry bar under a handle. Frost granules stood rough on the steel handle. The first roof vent came stiff and then shifted open. The gap formed a darker stripe in the cold pane field. He stepped down without bouncing the rack and kept still for a count. Smoke from the office moved toward the new openings and then upward along pane bays.

"Bias the burn," he said under his breath. "Inlet here, outlet there."

Back at the threshold, the diesel in the groove had started to burn back toward the door edge and he didn't want it to die there. At the irrigation manifold a length of poly tubing ran to a frozen spray point. Bracing a foot against the rack post, he pulled the line until the crimped clip slid. The tube came loose with a brittle sound. He dragged it through the runnel at the sill and laid it across the threshold and along the greenhouse base. The film ran unbroken from the office runnel across the threshold and along the greenhouse base trays. He swept the pass to the end that faced the depot so the film linked office to greenhouse and onward toward the depot side. He didn't count on capillarity inside a closed tube. He used the exterior as a brush. Diesel spread as a film on the tile and the frozen tray edges. He dragged back across his first pass to make it heavier, keeping the film continuous.

At the doorway, hair-thin tips hovered at the flame line from the yard side. He saw them escalate movement when the film brightened. They held at the edge rather than crossing, turned by temperature and combustion chemistry.

At the corner of the office desk a binder clapped once as air pushed through and let a sheet drop. Setting a hand on the file cabinet, he shoved. The cabinet rocked and creaked on the tiles. He timed the push to a steady count so the contact would be long and not sharp. The cabinet rode half a foot and then another half, chocking the doorway enough that anything coming at floor level would have to find a new seam. He put his back into the last inch and left it there, heavy against the jamb. A scraped patch on the tile showed gray under the soot.

Outside, a lateral hit the greenhouse mullion with a hard contact. Not wind-driven. Not random. The office doorway plume had lifted the angles. The needles that touched the mullion wetted, then clicked as resin flashed. He heard liquid strike the hot metal and flash. The odor changed. The diesel note remained dominant, with a hot resin trace that mixed with iron from the office blood and the heated steering column he had just left.

At the depot edge, he picked up the burning flare stub he had used to start the office, still bright by the sill. He kept his coat tight so it wouldn't loft air, rotated the stick to expose fresh composition. The red core held with a hiss.

He wedged it between a steel angle brace and the jamb so that the burning end projected out into the air just above the diesel film. Heat and light made the hair-tips under the door quiver. Angles out in the planted ten altered by degrees toward the brighter source. He kept his face turned enough that the radiant burn didn't increase his cheek temperature too fast for the skin to tolerate.

Warren stepped into the seam where office heat moved and stayed there while the draw shifted into the greenhouse. He measured his own

temperature by sensation in his hands and ears and used his cuff to hide skin that didn't need exposure. The steady light kept his breathing even; the tremor in his hand settled by degrees. It meant he had pinned a lure at his position and not on her path.

The first louvered vents he had opened began to draw. Smoke under the panes moved toward them and out. A thin flow of oxygen came in low through the office and across the greenhouse base, fanning the diesel film along the poly tube path. The blue at the edge of the film shifted to yellow where it found paper dust. The trays shone where ice melted and ran. At a tray edge the flame hesitated and then took in a line. Racks began to show flame.

The nearest trunks moved closer by small increments. No step sound, only a net change in angle. A heavy root in the snow pushed into the skirt along the greenhouse. Its outer tissue abraded against ice with a regular rasp, controlled in one plane with timing that adjusted to contact. Watching that line, he lifted the flare in its bracket a finger to show more of the emitting surface. The line stayed at the brightness. The rasp deepened as the root's outer layers found the warmer concrete base and skin met a new gradient.

Coughing once, he suppressed the next to a short exhale through wool. His sleeve edge grew damp and then dried again. He counted under his breath: six, hold; eight, hold. The heater relay clicked in the bunkhouse beyond the mess hall. That far sound sat in his inner ear as the track he had followed all night. In the next pause he held the count and did not move.

Glass pinged above him. A hairline ran in a V from a pane corner toward the center and stopped. Two beats later another ran at ninety degrees. The sealant at one mullion gap worked audibly, a small grit noise under a steady thermal load. He angled his head once and squinted. He knew what the next stage would look like. Delta T had passed the hold point for tensile failure in thin sheets. One more degree of shift and the edges would release into a spider pattern. With oxygen now feeding in

controlled, the burn would climb racks into fresher fuel without needing him to feed it again.

“Resin goes exothermic faster than the wood cells,” he said. “Watch the edges.”

He talked to himself for the record in his head. He had done that in labs when he had nobody to witness a run except whoever came in next.

The river came to mind; he set it aside. Two fingers to the metal brace gave him vibration. Tiny contacts came through the steel from the root pressing on the base. The pattern held. The flare threw a few sparks, then held at a lower, steady brightness. He put a glove around the stick and shifted it so the burning mass would not drop. He rotated the stick a degree and set it back. The planted source sat where it needed to sit. His position remained the dominant heat source.

The greenhouse interior developed a low layer of smoke he could see by the difference in how the firelight shone. Grease components in the resin made the layer denser and closer to the ceiling than a clean paper fire would have done. Drops formed on the bottom of the panes and shook and fell as new heat reached them. A droplet hit the hot mullion and flared into a pinprick.

He put his shoulder to the file cabinet again and ground its foot another inch to seal a small gap that showed at the floor. A white tip tested that gap and met the cabinet metal. It slid back toward the warmer seam at the baseboard fireline.

Another breath into his coat carried copper from the heated air. No dizziness yet. He blinked hard to keep his eyes clear and kept the count. Six. Hold. Eight. Hold.

Outside, a root grazed the greenhouse frame and traced it to the corner. The needles behind it stayed at a fixed angle, high on one side where the doorway plume traveled. The office window frame that had broken earlier let in more air than before as sealant tired under heat. He didn't need to tend that break now.

A distinct pop came from a roof pane where a small shard fell inward and broke again on a tray below. Flame traced along the label edge in a thin line where letters had already feathered into nothing you could read. He looked away from the letters. He stayed with the plan.

A noise from the planted ten made him lift his head a fraction. Not the scrape noise, not the light wooden rub. Resin in a trunk fissure boiled and whistled. That sound could mean either distance or proximity depending on wind and obstacles. Here it meant the nearest set had enough heat to change phase. They were closing in to the depot side.

He took the pry bar back to the roof vent handle and opened the next section. Weight stayed centered; he did not step fully onto the rack surface. The glow on the panes changed as more exhaust left. He watched for any bright change angled toward the slope where a figure might be. None showed. The brighter draw remained here.

Back at the door he set his palm to the jamb where paint had blistered. He pressed, then removed it fast. Nerve function told him the contact time and the surface temperature. Still below the point where skin would stick with full pressure. But not by much now.

Behind him a binder slid off the stack and landed with a dull slap. A page corner lifted under convection. He passed it and didn't look down.

The tank had to remain the primary target. The tank sat under a sheet of blowing snow. Ladder rungs showed through where his earlier steps had knocked off frost. He took three slow breaths, then moved. A dull flare pop from the doorway carried thin toward the slope.

Maya dropped low into the lee of the fence post and felt ice break under her knee. The cold went through coveralls and found the skin above the kneecap. That spot told her exactly where she was in her body when the rest had gone fuzzy at the edges.

She kept the count he had spoken under the rafters and on the slab and in the yard. Six in. Hold. Eight out. Hold. She kept her mouth inside her sleeve as long as she could and then drew in air against her teeth to make it slower.

The gully by the snag had seemed close when she had looked from above. From here it ran longer and dropped faster and filled with wind in small jets that blew powder into her face and then past. She saw old grass frozen under a clear skin and a rusted wire in a loop under snow crust where the fence line had sagged.

She angled into the cut at the point where the drift showed a lip. Snow gave in a slab under her boot and dropped her onto the next layer. She slid. Her palm hit rough glass of ice over gravel and skinned in a shallow line. Heat moved out through the cut fast and then stopped. Her jaw locked and she told it to loosen.

A branch moved above her. It came across in a sweep, not a chop. It took her pack strap with a sound of webbing riding over bark. No pressure at the end. It didn't pull. It only held and tested. She dropped a shoulder and rolled the pack up and off. The strap slid over her arm. A wrench in an outer pocket thumped once and then nothing else. She let it go.

"Small as you can," she said. Her teeth touched and stuttered and then settled into a rhythm she could control.

The grade steepened. She went to her hip and slid on purpose, boots low to control. A half-buried root knob showed under crust. She lifted and missed it and then hit the edge of the bank with her right thigh. Breath left her and didn't return for a second that felt slow. She put both hands to snow and found cold water under it. Mist came up and hit her face and stung the back of her throat and triggered a cough reflex.

Up-slope, a sharp sound carried in two parts. First the flare pop, then a small spit as resin in the air took heat. She looked over her shoulder. The light from above pulsed unevenly red. The nearest angles up there

changed direction. She saw needles shift to that light by degrees. The brighter heat upranged sharpened, and the roots pivoted away from her line; her window widened.

She pulled the beanie off her head. The fabric had heat in it from her scalp. She shoved it deep into powder, packed snow on top with the heel of her hand, and moved her hand away slow so she wouldn't lift air.

The river ran gray and black where slurry moved. Ice chunks touched and made a flat tick. She ignored the sound and went into the water. Ankles, shins, knees, hips. She stopped every inch to keep control so she didn't gasp. She put her mouth against the fabric at her sleeve and pressed it there. She went to her waist and then chest. The pain did not stay local. It went through her torso and out her arms. She got both hands under a rock edge in the current and leaned down and kept her shoulders under.

He had told her to exhale only when she had to through her nose. She did that once and held again.

The bank above her had thin scales of ice on roots that led into the water. Under the bank snow she saw a brightness where the slope let light through. A white tip slid along the crusted bank at the edge of that brightness. It stopped at a point and touched air. That was testing. It didn't run; it sampled. She lowered her head an inch, ready to go under if the tip broke water.

She kept her face in shadow under the bank and counted another six and another eight and then hid that next breath too because the tip paused where it had been.

Her fingers on the rock went numb and then didn't feel like fingers but blocks she held with other parts of the hand. She told her hands not to let go and set her forearms harder against the rock. The current rode past her sleeves. Water ran into one cuff and took heat out of the skin at the wrist faster than the rest. She clenched and then she stopped clenching. Wasted motion was heat. He had said that in the mess hall

when chairs were sliding on their own.

The pop from up-slope sounded again and cracked. She saw angles up there tilt more into that light. A needle cluster above the bank near her unfroze in a clump and fell into the water and drifted past her and bumped her coat and then rolled away.

She touched her pocket with one finger under the water. The sealed flare's cap pressed into the wet fabric through the pocket cloth. She had scooped it from under the step before she ran, reflex more than plan. The ridged plastic made a rough place. She pressed her finger there and used the pressure to keep her in her body. She did not move. When the current pressed harder, the ridges rasped her knuckle and set her count back in place.

The tip at the bank went a little farther out over the water and then pulled back in. It slid along the bank and away. She let her breath go slow through her nose and held again.

She tried to think of her feet. They were gone to her above the ankles and then found again as a dull weight. She tried to think of her upper arms. They were burning hard and then not. She let that rise and fall and did nothing else. The flare light from above blinked and then came back lower. She kept still.

Two counts since she went to water, Warren set the ball of his boot on the first ladder rung, its steel filmed with ice, and kept his heel from striking. He counted on the way up. When his glove met a rung he tested the friction before he moved his weight. When his hand slipped he adjusted pressure rather than grip.

The lid to the tank's top vent had a hex pattern ground into it and a hinge on one side. The wrench he had brought from the manifold fit. He set the wrench and leaned with his forearm. The cap creaked and did not

move. A brief sway in his inner ear passed when he fixed on the rung above his hand. He stopped to keep the ladder from telegraphing a pulse into the tank. He reset the wrench to a new angle and leaned again. The cap moved a quarter turn and then eased. Cold vapor rolled out into the air. In the wind and at this temperature, the vapor made a faint white that curled down then up as the hot office air crossed it. An ember from the office end touched the vapor edge and went out. He shut the cap a hair, opened it, and found a point where he could keep a slow release rather than a gush. Lower rate, longer duration. Less shock in the mix.

He climbed down to the manifold by moving one limb at a time while he held the rest strict. Roots bumped the tank skin under his boots as he passed. A pulse ran through the steel. Not regular footsteps. Not random. He mapped the attack points by the sequence of touches. Edges of roots rattled the ladder further down. He held for two breaths, then completed the descent.

At the rear he put the wrench back on the valve stem and pushed. The last quarter-turn took both hands. The stem moved and held. He braced the stem against the stop so the valve stayed fully open. Diesel in the groove toward the office thickened and then advanced faster along his track. Inside the office and greenhouse, flame at the base brightened. Oxygen flow from the louvers kept the front defined.

He stood to the side of the manifold where a spill had collected in a depression against the skirt. The flare at the door had burned down in brightness. At the angle in the doorway he took the burning stick and checked his glove for smear. He kept his coat closed around his torso to control heat loss and didn't put his face over the tip. The flare threw sparks and a red coal at the end of its composition. He carried it in a low arc where wind wouldn't take the heat away and placed it into the depression at the skirt. Set here, the hottest point stayed with him at the tank and did not build along the slope where she moved.

The diesel took in a sheet, not a pop. Flame spread across the film and climbed the side of the tank in bands where snow had melted and

refroze into a thin skin. The flame wrapped around imperfections and advanced. The metal hissed under the mix of fuel and water. He stepped back in the same path he had made coming forward and held.

A sustained tone rose inside the tank. Not air in a tube, not wind. Liquid and vapor under a new heat load set up a sound that sat inside the metal. The tone stayed flat at first and then rose a hair and held. The ladder carried a small tremor. Pops came out at random around the circumference as the steel skin moved. He put his hand against the tank and felt the change.

“Pressure,” he said. “Vapor pressure up. Leave the cap. Let it ramp.”

He looked left at the greenhouse windows. The panes had a field of straight cracks now. The mullions were dull red at the office side and darker under the racks. That meant the burn was as ordered. The intake and exhaust did their work. He didn’t need to go back in.

One foot lifted to the ladder and then laid back down. Going higher would move the brightest heat toward the slope and widen his thermal pattern across the yard. The grove would follow. He needed a fixed target here.

He went up one rung and stopped on purpose so his body would not make a sound through the structure. Weight set, he held. Breath stayed inside his coat and out through wool. He counted again. Six. Hold. Eight. Hold.

On the planted side, trunks vented resin from fissures and the sound came out a thin clean whistle that cut across the lower noise. Droplets fell from needles and hit the hot tanker skin and flashed. Airflow shifted smoke around him and into the lee of the tank where the wind set an eddy. His eyes watered and then cleared. He tucked his jaw onto his sleeve and waited for the tear film to drain without touching his face with a dirty glove.

Under him the valve showed as wavering air when seen at a slant. The nut at the stem had cooked off the snow that had hung on it. Inside the

office, paper flames had gone from yellow to darker orange as the fuel changed. In the greenhouse the racks had a line of fire across their fronts and burned in even segments. The louvers let a constant slab of smoke out along the roof that lay down in the wind and then broke into pieces visible in the shifts of gray. That told him airflow and heat were coupled now; the burn sustained without him.

A tremor from a root touched the ladder again and then a stronger hit. The groove in the snow at the base of the ladder widened as a thicker line pushed against it. He lifted one boot a half inch and then put it down and let the metal take the new contact. If he moved more, the ladder rails would resonate and that would pull worse.

He kept still; the intervals between taps lengthened.

The tank tone climbed again and found a new hold point. The skin under his hand moved subtle. On the far side, a ringing tick sounded where a weld flange met a strut. Not a crack. Not yet. Thermal expansion, preload, friction slip. Each sound had a meaning. He had to hear it clean.

He put his mind on the numbers. Lower explosive limit for this mix and temperature. Upper limit with air entrained through louvers and the broken office window, timed to the next faint pop at the seam. Ratios now shifted with the exhaust path open while heat wavered at the valve shadow. Vapor under the cap would have a higher temperature because of the layer and the shape of this tank; the next rise in tone confirmed it. He had cracked that cap to keep it from becoming a bomb without plan. Now it would still go. But it would go the way he meant it to go.

His hand shook and it tied to the torn sleeve and the cold on his forearm nerve more than anything else. He pushed his forearm under his coat with his other hand and set the cuff better to cover the skin. Feet stayed set. He kept the count.

A white root tip from the planted ten hit the tank skin below his left boot and rapped twice and slid. The tip tested a seam and held there. It pressed and then backed off a hair. When it moved again it moved to the

hot part. He saw that and kept his breath slow.

The office desk dropped. The sound carried as a heavy thud and a cascade of paper. He didn't look. He listened to the tank. A pop went off near his knee. He didn't flinch. He kept his eyes in a narrow band where he could see the valve shadow and the next rung and the seam of the tank. Light at his own hands gave him the information he needed.

The tone rose. The ladder resonated; vibration carried through his boots into his shins. He held. He waited for the rise to reach its point.

On the slope, he pictured water, a person under it and a rock and a sleeve, a taped hinge with a rough point, and a finger pressing that point. He did not picture anything after that. He kept the count.

Six. Hold. Eight. Hold.

One breath went into his coat and he held it until the urge to cough passed. Diesel coated the back of his throat; he tasted iron.

A second tone joined the first, two distinct frequencies. The interval between them held steady.

He rested his forehead on his arm and read the heat through his sleeve and waited for the next sound.

He did not step down.

He did not step up.

He held.

Chapter 13

Wildfire

The ladder under Warren's boot carried the vibration into his tibia. Not the small taps from probing tips. A longer tremor that stayed on one frequency. The two tones inside the tank held for two counts, then the higher one climbed a half step.

Breath stayed inside his coat, mouth against wool. The torn sleeve edge on his forearm had gone numb, then burned in a thin strip where radiant heat from the tanker reached exposed skin. He did not adjust his stance. The flare stub sat in the spill depression, and the hottest point stayed at the skirt. That was the idea. Fix the signal. Keep it off the slope.

Flame rose up the tank in bands. Snow on the steel melted and ran in thin lines under the diesel film. The film spread fast where the skirt sheltered it from wind. A patch of paint at a weld seam blistered and lifted. Pops came from the steel as it expanded and shifted.

The office and greenhouse were no longer separate burns. The doorway brace that had held the flare had heated enough that the steel file cabinet pushed against it had a dull red smear at its edge. The diesel line Warren had fed inside had already done its job; the paper was gone and the drives were gone, turned into softened black masses and then into fragments. The glow from inside the office no longer had a stable boundary.

The greenhouse roof vents he had pried open continued to exhaust, but now the volume was larger than the openings could manage. Smoke rolled out low as well, along pane edges and under the greenhouse frame. Where the frame met concrete, sealant had cooked and lost adhesion.

He watched the greenhouse panes because the failure would tell him where the heat pocket moved. Tempered glass did not crack into long blades. It stayed intact until internal stress exceeded a threshold, and then it released at once into cubes.

The first pane went on the depot side. He heard a ping at the corner and then a rapid series of sharp ticks as microcracks formed across the sheet. The sheet bowed slightly and then collapsed inward, a spill of small cubes into the racks and trays. The cubes caught fire at their edges where resin droplets had condensed and then cooked.

Heat moved along the diesel trails he had laid into the greenhouse base. The poly irrigation tube had carried the fuel as a smear; now that smear acted as a wick. Flame followed it along the tray legs and across ice-coated concrete. Plastic tray rims softened and sagged. The meltwater on the floor flashed to steam where the flame touched it.

A second pane popped on the windward end. The release was louder, the cubes more numerous. Glass fell and slid across the concrete, and the heat front jumped, using the broken panes as intake. Cold air came in hard at the new openings, feeding oxygen and carrying sparks farther into the racks.

Warren opened his mouth inside the coat and spoke low, for nobody. "Oxygen up. Rate up."

The Titans at the greenhouse edge had been reacting for hours, moving by degrees. That movement changed once their tissues reached ignition temperature. Resin beaded on bark had thickened and then thinned. He had smelled it: hot resin, iron, diesel. Now he saw it on the nearest trunk as it caught.

The flame did not creep. It spread across bark in a film, following resin seams and needle bases. Needles went from glossy green to dark, then to a brief flare and collapse. Small branches flamed in a thin film.

He had considered the possibility of accelerant in the tissue since the first day. Growth that uniform did not happen without chemistry. Now he

had the confirmation.

The first Titan to fully take burned fast and bright. The trunk surface produced a wet shine before it charred. It made a sound at knots and fissures, a high, continuous whistle near the upper range of hearing as gas and vapor vented through small openings. The pitch shifted with pressure changes as the tissue heated.

He set his gaze on the seam where the gas came out. No pattern. No intention. Just pressure and geometry.

Flame from the tanker skirt reached higher. It tracked the ladder side rail and heated it, and the metal under his boot warmed enough that the ice film turned to water. His boot sole slipped a fraction. He shifted weight by moving his knee, not his foot, and found friction again.

The sound from the tank changed. The two tones that had held steady interfered, producing a third oscillation he could feel in the rail.

He had cracked the vent cap to avoid a sealed bomb. The cap still leaked vapor. The leak created a plume at the top that had been too cold to ignite at first. Now heat flux from the burning skirt and the greenhouse combined with rising convection. The leak vapor warmed. The mixture above the tank moved into a range where ignition could propagate.

He said it anyway, because naming mechanisms had kept him alive this long. “Lower explosive limit.”

The tanker vent area flashed at the top with a brief orange pulse. Not a full detonation, not yet. A flame front ran across the vapor-rich layer, consumed it, and died when the mixture fell out of range.

Warren’s mouth filled with diesel taste. He swallowed once. He did not cough.

The fire now had enough heat to change the air movement around the depot. Wind at ground level shifted as hot air rose. Snow that fell into the rising column vanished. Soot from the office and greenhouse mixed with steam and made the air thick. Visibility across the yard shrank. The

planted blocks beyond the office became a darker mass with flickers of orange at their edges.

A row at the greenhouse line failed at the base. Roots had been exposed by snow scouring and by earlier movement. Those roots burned once the heat reached them. They shriveled and charred, and they did not form stable coals. The row bowed toward the heat and fell, one trunk taking the next with it.

The fall sequence moved through the grid in the direction of the tanker and greenhouse, because that was where tissue failure occurred first. Branches snapped and threw sparks. Needles flared on contact with embers.

The burn spread as an industrial fuel event interacting with resin-rich biomass under wind and snow. Steam rose from snow in bursts where heat hit it. Meltwater ran down rows and then flashed to vapor when it found hotter surfaces.

Warren kept his position because the rows that fell and burned stayed oriented to the strongest heat source. That had to remain him and the tanker and the greenhouse. If the strongest signal shifted down slope, Maya would not have time to compensate.

He turned his head enough to see the river cut through smoke and falling snow. He could not see her. He did not try to.

A crack from the greenhouse roof sounded, followed by a cascade. More tempered panes released. The cubes fell in sheets, and the racks under them collapsed as heat softened plastic and then took wood. The greenhouse interior became open to snowfall at multiple points. Snow that fell through those openings disappeared in short puffs where it hit hot metal or flame.

The Titans beyond the greenhouse took in sequence. Trunks that had been too cold to ignite caught once embers and convective heat reached their resin lines. The engineered tissues burned with a rapid spread through needles and bark. Branches that had moved by degrees earlier

now fell by gravity and failure, not by coordinated motion.

Gas vented from knots again, the same high whistle. He heard it at multiple knot-holes, repeated at each trunk.

A larger sound came from the bunker side. He shifted his eyes, not his feet.

The bunkhouse roofline had been visible earlier as a dark rectangle, snow piled on top and a faint plume from the flue when the heater had been running. Now the flue plume was gone, replaced by smoke from the direction of the building itself. Roots inside the structure had carried fuel and tissue into seams and cavities. Once the external fire reached those cavities, the roots charred.

The building did not make a sound that suggested will. It failed where materials failed.

The first visible change was at the roof edge. Snow slid off in a sheet as heat from below melted the bond layer. The sheet fell and broke into clumps, and those clumps landed on burning debris and flashed to steam.

Then the roof sagged. A section dropped at the far corner. The rafters, exposed earlier when the crew climbed up, had been webbed with cords and fibers. Those fibers burned. Belts burned. Wood members heated and lost capacity. The roof came down in a slow sequence, then faster as the load redistributed.

Warren could not see the ornamented body that had hung in those rafters. He did not look for it.

The light above the ridge changed as the fire grew. It was not daylight. It was a blue-white glare at the upper edge of the smoke, the color seen when metal arcs and when oxygen-rich combustion ran hot. Snowflakes that crossed that glare were gray at first, then darkened as soot coated them. Close to the hottest column, the flakes vanished in short-lived steam puffs.

Steam fog formed near the office and greenhouse line. It was not clean. It carried soot and resin aerosols. It obscured the far block.

The tanker tone rose again as the vent leak warmed. The interference tightened until he felt it as a single vibration in the rail.

Warren shifted his weight down the ladder rung, one step closer to ground, not because he wanted distance but because the rail was too hot under his glove. His coat sleeve near the cuff had started to singe. The smell added burnt wool to diesel and resin.

He did not hold the flare anymore. The flare stub was in the diesel spill at the skirt, its composition nearly gone. His hands were empty. He kept them close to his torso to reduce convective loss and to keep skin from becoming a new micro-signal away from the tank.

The office wall nearest the greenhouse glowed from within. A section of siding fell away and exposed stud cavities already burning.

A pressure surge hit. Not a blast wave that knocked him back. A rapid expansion of hot gases that pushed smoke and steam outward and then upward. Flame rolled out of the office opening and then folded back into the column as oxygen fed from the greenhouse breaks.

Warren's glasses were not on his face. He had not noticed when they left. He had given them to Maya earlier because tape at the hinge had failed once in the cold, and he could not afford to fumble.

He blinked into the glare and kept his eyes narrow.

A Titan trunk fell near the tanker and struck the snow with a wet thud, already burning. Needles touched the diesel film and flared. Flame ran along the film toward the skirt and then up the tank again.

He said, "Delta T," because it was the simplest way to name why glass and sealant and bark were failing. Temperature difference, stress, release.

The next change was fast.

The vapor at the top vent did not just flash and die. The mixture held within range long enough that ignition propagated back into the vent flow. A sustained flame took at the vent seam. It fed on the vapor release and the rising hot air.

Heat pressed through the leather of his glove; his palm prickled against the rail.

The tank tone shifted to a higher pitch as the vent flame held. The metal pops increased.

Warren's skin at his cheeks tightened. His eyelashes crusted with soot and then with moisture from steam. He kept breathing in the six-count and out in the eight-count, but the air was hotter now, and the wool at his mouth smelled of singe.

Rows beyond the tanker collapsed in sequence. Fire moved into the planted ten, and the grid layout broke into falls and burns. Trunks fell where roots burned through. Branches broke where knots vented and then charred. The sequence moved in waves through the rows because the heat front moved in waves through fuel.

Steam fog thickened, and the nearest objects lost sharp edges.

The final surge came from the combined fuel sources: tanker vapor, open manifold diesel, greenhouse and office structural fuel, and resin-rich biomass.

A rapid expansion of orange flame spread from the office-greenhouse junction and the tanker skirt, consuming the doorway line and then the air above it. It was not a single explosion with a clean shock. It was a rapid expansion and flame spread that made the boundaries disappear.

Warren stayed where he was. No scream. No gesture. His hands remained close to his body.

The last visible detail was his outline against the flame column for a fraction of a second, a compact shape one rung up, empty hands, head angled toward the burn line where he had been tracking changes all

night.

Then the flame spread through the space.

Steam fog and smoke covered what was left of the office wall.

The higher tank tone thinned and held. Steam thickened along the river cut, and downstream the roar broadened into one band of sound.

Maya did not know when she moved. The change in sound told her something had happened. The roar behind the ridge got louder, then became less sharp after a heavy collapse removed one set of crack noises. Her body had been still for so long that starting motion pulled at stiff joints.

The rock under her hands did not change shape, but her grip did. Her fingers had gone from feeling the stone to feeling nothing and then to feeling pain in a distant way. She pulled her hands in closer to her body to keep circulation and then forced them back onto the rock because losing anchor meant drifting into current.

Staying under worked until the urge to breathe built in her chest and tightened her throat. She kept her mouth closed and let a small amount of air out through her nose, then stopped.

“One Mississippi,” she mouthed, lips in the sleeve. Her jaw shook and tapped her teeth. “Two Mississippi.”

The count did not stop the reflex. It gave her something to follow.

She rose enough to put her mouth against the sleeve above the waterline and drew in one breath. The breath was too fast. Cold air and smoke scratched her throat. She pushed herself down again.

Her shoulder brushed the underside of the bank ice, and pain shot through the trapezius. She did not make a sound. She held the rock

harder, knuckles blanching to chalk-white.

Above the bank, a branch struck the snow and ice near the waterline. It did not chop. It came down with weight and then dragged, scraping across crust and sending needles and embers into the water. The movement aligned toward heat. It did not find much.

In the water, her warmth dispersed outward. The current took it and spread it. That was why he had sent her here.

A small piece of burning debris landed on the surface and hissed. Another landed and hissed again. The hiss sounded close because the water carried sound.

She surfaced to her nose and saw a chunk of char and resin floating toward her. It looked light until it got close. It carried a red ember at one edge.

She pushed down, but the ember touched her shoulder as she moved. Pain flared in a tight spot. The fabric of her coveralls smoked for a second and then cooled under water.

Under the fabric, skin blanched, then lifted at the shoulder.

Her mouth opened without permission. She bit her tongue and closed it. Air forced out between her teeth in a thin stream. She pushed deeper.

“One Mississippi,” she mouthed again. Her lips were numb. The words were silent.

She did not think about him in full sentences. The only detail that came was the count. Six. Hold. Eight. Hold. The count was inside her now, tied to muscle memory, tied to the need not to move. She had mocked his counting early because it sounded like an old man habit. Now it kept her from thrashing. Thrashing would make heat. Heat would draw.

The surface water warmed slightly where embers fell. Not comfort warm. Only a small change in contrast. She felt it as less bite when she rose for air, and used it by staying close to where embers fell.

She shifted her hands along the rock and felt gravel under one palm. The earlier descent had split her palms; the same skin tore again on ice edges and small stones. Blood did not flow much. The cold clamped vessels. She saw a faint pink cloud under water that dispersed immediately.

Behind her, the roar peaked again and then began to settle. The sharp crack of glass and the distinct thump of falling trunks became less frequent. The sound became a sustained burn and collapsing timbers. A low glow reflected on the underside of smoke down in the river cut.

She could not stay under forever. Her hands were failing. Her arms had stopped obeying in precise ways.

Along the riverbed, she moved by inches, pulling with elbows and knees, keeping her torso low. The current pressed against her chest and took breath away each time she tried to surface.

A culvert shadow lay downstream where the bank formed an overhang and the current changed. She had seen it during equipment runs in summer, when the river ran lower and the culvert mouth was visible. Now it was buried under snow at the top and open at water level.

She crawled toward it. Her hips snagged on a submerged branch. She freed herself by moving one knee at a time, no kick, no thrash.

Another piece of debris landed on the surface behind her and hissed out. She did not turn her head to look.

Her pocket bumped against the rock as she moved. The ridged cap of the sealed flare pressed through wet fabric. She checked it with two fingers. Still there. A small certainty.

She reached the culvert shadow and found an eddy where the current slowed. Water there was colder because it was less mixed with ember-warmed surface. She tucked herself under the bank and held onto a submerged root that ran along the bottom.

Her shivering started as a small tremor and then became violent. It did not warm her. It wasted energy. Her teeth chattered hard enough that she worried she would bite through her tongue. She pressed her jaw into her sleeve and held it there.

The glow behind the ridge stayed constant. It lit the smoke above the plantation and made the falling snow gray.

Her eyes closed. She opened them again. She did not know how long that took.

Her breath came in shallow bursts. "One Mississippi," she mouthed again, but the syllables were sloppy.

The roar behind her became a lower sound.

Somewhere above the bank, a thin mechanical whine came and went, distant and then nearer. It cut across her stupor and was gone again.

She stayed in the eddy until her hands stopped responding the way she wanted. Her face pressed into wool, body pinned under ice-shadow and current, and she drifted into a stupor.

The snowmobiles made a thin mechanical whine that rose above the remaining crackles. The county search-and-rescue lead heard them before the ridge line came into view.

The lead kept goggles down. Soot floated through the snowfall and stuck to the lens. A wipe with the back of a glove smeared it, but visibility stayed workable between storm bands.

The county had cut a path up the access road switchbacks with a dozer where they could, then sent snowmobiles and a tracked UTV the last stretch. The cut ended short of the ridge where the drift had set up hard, and they walked the last distance.

“Rourke,” a deputy called over the engine noise, “you want the hazard tape first or the sweep?”

Lila Rourke kept her eyes on the slope edge. “Sweep first. Tape after. Don’t step into anything you can’t read.”

The call had shifted to recovery and a hazard sweep.

The plantation above the river had burned down to stumps and scattered debris. The grid layout showed as rows of charred posts and collapsed trunks. Snow fell and turned gray as it sifted through soot. Where heat still rose from buried fuel, the snow vanished in short puffs and left damp ash.

Rourke kept the radio clipped high on her jacket and spoke into it only once clear of the smolder zone.

“Team One on scene,” she said. “Active smolder. Visibility moderate. Watch for hot spots under snow.”

A deputy behind her coughed and pulled a collar up.

The greenhouse frame still stood in sections. The roof vents were open. Most panes were gone. The ones still in frame had failed in cubes and left jagged edges in the mullions. The office wall was partially standing, studs exposed. The steel file cabinet sat on its side near the doorway line, half buried in ash and snow.

A fuel tanker sat at the depot, its paint burned away in patches. The ladder was warped. The top vent area had a black ring around it.

Bodies came first by habit. Fire did not leave much when it ran hot and had accelerants. Nothing human lay in the open.

Rourke set the perimeter. Boots crunched on refrozen slush and ash, and soot smeared onto the snow where they stepped.

“Watch your footing,” she said. “There could be voids.”

She raised her voice for the line. “Grid five-meter intervals; probe for voids.”

Her eyes went to the river cut. Survivors ran downhill, and the water drew them.

Tracks showed in the ash that led toward the fence line, faint depressions filled with gray snow. The tracks ended near the gully route and then disappeared into drift.

At the culvert shadow, a rescuer raised a hand.

Rourke crouched at the bank and saw a face in the dark. The person's lips were blue. Skin at the cheeks looked tight. A shoulder showed a blistered patch where fabric had melted and refrozen. Fingers on one hand were pale and slick, then mottled where blood tried to return.

"Hey," Rourke said, voice level. "Can you look at me?"

The woman's eyes moved. The movement was slow.

"What's your name?"

The woman's mouth opened. No sound came. Her throat worked once.

Rourke leaned closer but did not touch bare skin. "Okay. Don't fight it. We're going to get you out."

A teammate slid a mylar blanket out of a pack. It crinkled in a thin, steady noise.

They eased the woman up, supporting head and shoulders. The woman's teeth chattered hard enough that her jaw jerked. Her eyes tried to focus and failed.

They wrapped her in mylar and then in a heavier wool layer. The mylar reflected firelight and then gray daylight. It made a constant crackle as it shifted.

Rourke checked the shoulder blister without ripping fabric. "Thermal contact. Brief. Treat as burn."

A rescuer hovered close. "Pulse okay?"

“Fast,” Rourke said, fingers on the carotid through wet cloth. “Cold tachycardia. Get a litter down here.”

The radio came up. “Patient located at culvert by river edge. Hypothermia, possible frost injury, burn to shoulder. Request litter and hot packs. Approach from south side; avoid unstable ash near structures.”

The woman’s hand twitched under the mylar. Rourke saw a bulge in the pocket at the hip and reached in cautiously. A gloved hand found a ridged plastic cap. A road flare, sealed. It stayed where it was.

Her glove brushed thin wire under wet fabric, bent frames, tape ragged. Rourke left them in place.

“Leave it,” Rourke said. “Don’t try to grab it.”

The woman’s eyes tracked to Rourke’s face and then away. Her throat worked again. “W...”

Nothing else.

No more questions. Speech cost heat.

The litter came in. They lifted the woman and strapped her down. The straps creaked.

“Any others?” a deputy asked, scanning the burned rows.

Rourke’s gaze went to the office frame, then to the tanker. “We’ll sweep.”

The search for Warren was a grid walk with hazard awareness. They worked the office edge and the greenhouse frame, then circled the tanker ladder area and the open patches where a person might have been thrown clear.

No body. No clothing bundle. No obvious remains.

Near the steel file cabinet, a rescuer pointed.

Rourke stepped closer. A pair of melted eyeglass frames had fused to the cabinet edge, lenses slumped into opaque ovals.

“Mark it,” Rourke said. “Photograph it. Bag a sample if it comes free.”

“Anything that helps on the missing guy?”

“Could be anyone’s,” Rourke said. “Log and move.”

Coordinates went into the GPS.

Rourke spoke into the radio. “Active accelerant indicators present. Investigation required. No confirmed remains located for second subject at this time.”

The team moved toward the bunkhouse footprint. The building had collapsed into a half-burned heap. Concrete walls stood in sections. The ceiling had come down and then been burned through.

A smell of wet ash and old diesel lingered.

They found the rafters by following exposed beam ends. A belt remnant hung, burned through.

Rourke stopped where the cold cavity would have been and looked up at what was left of the rigging points. The belts had been placed with care, looped to keep weight off a pinned body. Heat had taken them anyway.

In the cavity area near where the showers would have been, they found the injured sawyer. He was still strapped near a beam segment, but the belts were slack where heat had burned through and then refrozen. His body was cold and stiff.

Rourke checked for any sign of life anyway, because protocol did not allow assumption. No pulse. No breath. Pupils fixed.

She rose and said it once. “Deceased. Document.”

A rescuer swallowed and looked away.

Rourke spoke to the deputy. “This is going to be paperwork.”

The deputy nodded and did not ask for details.

Voices stayed professional. Calls for equipment and coordinates came out in short bursts, then stopped.

The litter team carried Maya up the bank. Her head rolled once and then steadied. The mylar blanket crackled as it shifted.

Rourke kept pace and watched her hands. The fingers stayed pale, then mottled.

Maya's eyes opened once more. She tried to speak again and failed. Her throat made a dry click.

Rourke said, "Save it. You can tell it later."

Above the river, engines and radios crowded the ridge. Headlamps swept the smoke, and the tracked UTV idled where the snow had been packed down.

Rourke looked back once at the ridge. Smoke rose in a low column. Snow fell through it and turned gray before it hit the ground.

Below the ridge, the plantation grid held as rows of charred posts. Gray snow settled between them.

Then she turned away and followed the litter toward the road.

Chapter 14

Silent Night

The trailer rested on a turnout scraped down to hard snow. A tracked UTV idled beyond it with the engine kept low, exhaust trailing along the ground before it thinned. The ridge line was visible through the trees when the wind shifted, black posts where the plantation had been and a band of smoke that rose straight on calm moments.

Inside, heat dried the air enough that Maya's throat hurt. A propane heater stood in a corner with a perforated guard, blue flame behind it. A thin fan moved warm air along the floor. The floor itself was a rubber mat laid over plywood; it flexed under boots. A folding table took up most of the space, one side pressed close to a narrow bench.

Maya sat with her shoulders drawn in. Someone had put her in a clean sweatshirt that did not fit right over her coveralls, and a county blanket lay across her knees. Her left shoulder burned under the fabric, a constant patch of pain that pulsed when she shifted. Both hands were wrapped. The bandage on her right hand bulged at the palm where blisters had opened and been dressed. Two fingertips on the left hand were pale, waxy at the pads, the color not matching the rest of her skin.

Her hands shook anyway. The tremor came and went, worse when she tried to hold them still.

A paper cup of water sat near her. She had taken one swallow and then stopped. The warmth in the trailer made her mouth feel dry in a different way than cold ever had.

Lila Rourke stood with her jacket still on, reflective strips catching the overhead fluorescents. Her gloves were tucked under one arm. She

kept her weight on one foot and then the other, careful with the floor, careful with the space. Her jaw was set; a tendon stood out when she swallowed.

Carmen Hollis took the chair opposite Maya. Her hair was pinned back clean, no loose strands. She wore a parka that looked new, the kind issued in bulk with a company logo patch on the chest. She set a thin folder on the table and opened it with practiced motions.

“Maya,” Carmen said. Her voice was soft and controlled. “Thank you. What you did out there, staying alive and getting yourself to the river, is bravery. That’s the word for it. A lot of people don’t have that.”

Maya stared at the folder, not Carmen’s face. The table surface had a plastic sheen that caught the light. A pen lay at the top of the folder, capped.

Carmen slid the top sheet toward her. The paper made a dry sound against the plastic.

“This is a confidentiality agreement,” Carmen said. “It’s standard after an incident. It protects you as much as it protects the company. It keeps your name out of news coverage and off social media threads. It keeps your medical details private. It keeps the details from getting distorted.”

Lila’s eyes went to the paper and then to Maya. The line of her mouth did not change.

Maya’s fingers tightened without meaning to. The bandage compressed, and a sting ran up her palm.

Carmen turned the folder slightly, aligning it with Maya’s view.

“We’re calling this what it was,” Carmen said. “A tragic electrical fire exacerbated by storm conditions. Power instability, generator load, wind, and the snowfall. It spread. The county will have its investigation, of course, and we’ll provide what they request through our incident counsel. But we want everyone using the same wording.”

Lila's jaw tightened further. Maya saw it because Lila was not hiding it. Her jaw locked, and the muscle at her temple jumped.

Smoke sat in the back of Maya's throat, though there wasn't smoke in the trailer. Her tongue pressed against the roof of her mouth and came away dry.

"Electrical," Maya said.

Carmen didn't answer the single word directly. She nodded once, small.

"I know the word feels insufficient," Carmen said. "When you've been through something that intense, it's hard to hear a label. But labels are how the state works. The county, OSHA, insurance. The label lets resources move."

Lila shifted her weight. Her boot soles squeaked slightly on the rubber mat.

Maya stared at the lines on the page. Her eyes struggled to hold focus. For a second, the letters blurred.

"Can I get pain meds?" Maya asked.

Lila's eyes flicked to her, quick.

Carmen leaned forward a fraction, hands open on the table.

"The medics said you can have more once you're down off the ridge and assessed," Carmen said. "Right now we need this signed so transport authorization and follow-up care can be routed."

The phrasing landed flat. It gave her steps without giving her answers.

Maya's left hand twitched. The two pale fingertips felt wrong. They felt swollen and empty at the same time.

Carmen continued without rushing.

“There’s also a compensation package,” Carmen said. “Because you were on site. Because you were injured. Because you are part of this company community even as a contractor. It includes immediate funds and future medical coverage related to this incident. Wound care, frost injury follow-up, physical therapy if needed. That coverage is contingent on this agreement. I need to be very clear about that. It is tied to cooperation and confidentiality.”

Maya looked up then. Carmen’s eyes were steady. The steadiness did not come from care. It came from practice.

“Contingent,” Maya said.

“Yes,” Carmen said. “And I don’t want you to hear that as a threat. It’s a structure. We take care of our people. In return, the company isn’t left with stray statements that turn into claims. That’s the condition.”

Lila’s lips parted.

“Carmen,” Lila said, and stopped. The word came out and then stopped.

Carmen glanced to Lila, polite. She didn’t look away from Maya for long.

“I appreciate County Search and Rescue’s work,” Carmen said. “Truly. The storm made access difficult, and your team worked within the constraints.”

Lila’s eyes went to the small window beside the door. Through it, the burned ridge showed between branches, the smoke thinning and then thickening when wind pushed it into view. Then her eyes returned to the paper.

That glance was quick, and Maya recognized it. She used the same assessment on machines when a hydraulic line was compromised and something still had to move.

Maya’s throat clicked. She swallowed dry.

“What about the trees that shipped?” she asked.

Carmen blinked. Once. Not dramatic, but noticeable because she had been so controlled.

“The outbound list has a hold code posted where we can post one,” Carmen said. “If a load is already off-site, it moves under distribution rules.”

“That doesn’t answer me,” Maya said.

Carmen kept her voice level.

“Logistics is running a stop-and-confirm on any bill that hasn’t cleared the corridor,” Carmen said. “Anything beyond that is handled through internal review and legal.”

Maya’s hands shook harder. The question had sped her pulse.

“There were manifests,” Maya said. Her words came out rough. “There were VIP tags. That truck left before the storm closed the road.”

Carmen’s expression held.

“The investigation will determine what is relevant,” Carmen said.

Lila’s fingers tightened around her gloves. Leather creaked.

Heat climbed into Maya’s face. Her skin tightened, and she kept her teeth together until it passed.

“You’re using that word because you don’t want to say anything real,” Maya said.

Carmen didn’t argue. She shifted the folder so the signature line sat close to Maya.

“Maya,” Carmen said, “you’re exhausted. Your core temperature was low enough that my medical advisor is concerned about rebound issues. You have frost injury to those fingertips and possible partial-thickness burn to your shoulder. You will need follow-up care. Those bills get large very fast when you’re out of network or uninsured. This package makes

sure you aren't fighting that. The agreement makes sure your name doesn't get dragged into news coverage. I'm offering a workable option."

Lila's gaze stayed on the paper. Her face was still, except for the jaw muscle.

Maya looked down at her hands. The bandage on her right hand showed a faint rust-colored spot that had bled through. The edges were clean. Whoever wrapped it had done the work right.

She tried to keep the tremor from showing and failed.

"What happens if I don't sign?" she asked.

Carmen exhaled through her nose.

"Then we proceed with a county report and the standard worker's comp route," Carmen said. "And it becomes slower. Less predictable. More paperwork. And I can't guarantee coverage beyond what the state mandates. I can't guarantee housing support for recovery. I can't guarantee anything, honestly, because it leaves the company exposed."

Exposed. Maya heard the word and thought of bare skin going numb and then burning.

Her eyes went to Lila.

"You saw it," Maya said.

Lila's eyes met hers. Lila didn't nod. She didn't deny. Her throat worked once.

"I saw a lot of things," Lila said. Her voice stayed quiet. "I also saw a burn zone I can't safely walk without probes."

Carmen's pen sat capped at the top of the folder.

Maya's mouth opened, then shut. Heat had dried the corners of her lips. She licked them, tasted antiseptic from the medic's swab.

Clinical words were there if she reached for them: thermal gradient, mechanosensing, fungal partners. The fibers that pulled. She didn't say

any of it.

Warren had said the soil would recover without anyone's permission. People wouldn't. He had said the Titans weren't choosing; they were following heat and pressure. He had said, "Stillness buys us time," while the floor came apart.

He wasn't here. She was.

Maya looked at the signature line.

"You're going to call it electrical," she said.

"Yes," Carmen said.

"You're going to say the storm did it," Maya said.

"We're going to say the storm made an already bad situation worse," Carmen said. "Which is true."

Lila's eyes flicked to Carmen's mouth and then back down.

Maya's fingers cramped around the pen when she picked it up. The cap was stiff. She pulled it off with her teeth because her bandages made the grip wrong. The plastic clicked when it came loose.

She put the cap on the table and held the pen. The tremor made the pen point wobble above the paper.

Carmen placed a hand on the folder edge to steady it. Not touching Maya. Not crossing that line.

Maya lowered the pen and signed.

The name came out uneven, the letters taller at the end where her hand jerked. When she finished, she held the pen still for a beat and then set it down.

Her face tightened. She breathed through her mouth once and then stopped.

Carmen nodded.

“Thank you,” Carmen said. “I know this isn’t what you want to be doing today.”

She opened a second sheet and pointed.

“Initial here,” Carmen said.

Maya initialed. Then again. Each time, the pen dragged slightly where the paper had absorbed moisture.

Carmen flipped the page and held it flat.

“Last one,” she said.

Maya signed again.

Carmen’s small smile came then. Only the corners of her mouth moved; her gaze stayed fixed.

She gathered the pages into a neat stack, aligned the corners, and slid them back into the folder. She tucked the pen away.

“I’ll leave you with your copy,” Carmen said, and set a thin packet near Maya’s water cup. “It will also be emailed.”

Maya didn’t move to take it.

Carmen stood.

“Transport will be staged at the bottom of the grade,” Carmen said. “Your provider contact will be routed through our claims office. Lila, thank you again.”

Lila didn’t respond at first. She watched Carmen’s hands on the folder.

When Carmen stepped toward the door, Lila spoke.

“Carmen,” Lila said.

Carmen paused.

Lila’s mouth opened. She stopped. Her eyes went to the window. The ridge smoke was thinner now, not gone. Then her eyes returned to

Carmen.

“Just... don’t interfere with the county report,” Lila said.

Carmen kept her expression neutral.

“County requests go through the same intake as everything else,” she said, and opened the door.

Cold air slid in. Warm air from the heater flowed out for a second, then the cold caught the damp cloth on Maya’s legs. The door shut again.

The heater fan kept blowing.

Maya stared at the copy packet. Her name was on it. The ink still looked wet in the fluorescent light.

Lila stayed standing.

“You okay to ride?” Lila asked.

Maya’s throat worked. She nodded once.

Lila picked up her gloves and put them on, slow.

Outside, boots crunched on snow. A vehicle door shut.

Maya’s hands shook, then steadied for a moment when she tucked them under the blanket and pressed them into her abdomen. The heat hurt her fingertips. It hurt because sensation was coming back in pieces.

Her eyes stayed open. If she closed them, she saw the office doorway. She saw the flare. She saw the ladder and the tanker skin. She saw the moment when his outline disappeared into orange light.

She did not say his name in the trailer.

Cold air hit her face at the trailer door. A deputy steadied her elbow as she stepped down and into the SUV.

The SUV smelled of damp wool and engine heat. Someone had laid a tarp across the back seat. Maya sat on it with the blanket around her shoulders. Her hair was still stiff in places from river water, and her coveralls were crusted at the knees and thighs where ice had formed and then melted.

A deputy drove. Another sat in the passenger seat with a clipboard and a county jacket. Their voices stayed low. They talked about road conditions and where the plow had cut a lane.

Maya watched the road.

The access road switchbacks fell away in slow curves. The dozer had left hard berms at the edges. Snowbanks rose on both sides, cut surfaces showing layers of different storms. The bank faces reflected the gray daylight and the SUV's headlamps in dull patches.

Beyond the road, the burned plantation grid appeared and vanished between trunks. What was left stood low and black. Stems protruded from snow, some snapped, some still upright. A few spots still smoked where buried fuel had not gone cold.

Maya kept her face turned to the side window. The glass was cold against her forehead when she leaned into it.

Inside the bandage, her right hand flexed. The pull under the dressing made her hiss through her teeth.

The shoulder blister caught when the sweatshirt shifted, and she adjusted the blanket without lifting her arm much.

Her left hand tingled. The sensation came in bursts, then fell back to a dull numb burn. The two pale fingertips stayed pale; the pads looked waxy.

"You need anything?" the deputy in the passenger seat asked.

Maya shook her head.

He didn't push.

At one curve, the road opened briefly to a view down the slope. A strip of river showed, dark between snow shelves. She saw the cutbank and then lost it as the SUV turned.

The deputy said something about a gate being cleared, about a utility truck that had gotten stuck overnight. Maya didn't answer.

A bird crossed the road ahead. It flew low, wings beating steady. The shape resolved as a hawk when it rose slightly over the bank and then dropped into the trees on the far side.

The blanket slipped at her shoulder. Maya tugged it back with her wrist rather than her fingers.

On the floorboard near her feet sat a clear plastic bag with a property tag zip-tied to it. At the trailer door, a deputy had scanned the barcode on the tag, then initialed a line on the clipboard before handing it to her. Her name was written on the tag in block letters.

Reaching down, she took the bag by the top, careful not to crinkle it too loudly. The plastic made sound anyway. Working one-handed, she pulled the zipper ridge apart after a few tries; the bandage on her right hand made the grip wrong.

The air inside smelled like wet cloth and antiseptic.

The glasses came out next.

The frames were bent slightly. Tape at the hinge was ragged and still held. The lenses were scratched, and the metal felt hard and cold against her palm. The tremor in her hand made the frames tap once against the bandage before she got them still.

For a moment she held them, then tucked them into her sweatshirt pocket. The wire edge pressed through the fabric and into her ribs when she leaned back, and the pocket sagged with the weight.

She didn't take out the flare.

The ridge disappeared behind a stand of unburned firs and Douglas-firs that had caught ash but not flame. Their needles were darker from soot. Snow clung to some branches and slid off in small clumps when wind pushed through.

Maya watched the line where burn stopped and forest continued. The boundary was uneven. It followed fuel and wind and what had been planted in straight lines.

When the road straightened, she looked back through the rear window.

Smoke rose from the ridge in thin columns. It drifted and thinned as it climbed. Snow fell through the column and turned gray.

Turning forward again, she let her forehead rest against the side glass.

Her phone vibrated in her lap. The buzz startled her because the interior had been quiet except for tires and the heater fan.

Maya lifted the phone with her bandaged hand and used her thumb to wake the screen.

Unknown number.

Message: "Stay safe. We appreciate your cooperation."

Her throat tightened.

She read it once more and then set the phone face-down on her thigh. She didn't delete it. She didn't reply.

Her eyes closed.

The engine held one pitch, steady enough to cover the small sounds in the cabin: heater air moving low by her ankles, paper shifting on the deputy's clipboard, fabric rubbing at her shoulder bandage when she breathed. The seatbelt stayed tight across her sternum. Her ears felt full on the curves, and she counted three shallow breaths before forcing the fourth longer.

The SUV descended in careful turns.

At lower elevation, the snowbanks grew shorter. The gray light eased. Power lines appeared along the road, sagging under ice.

Far ahead, a cluster of lights marked the first town edge. Some blinked. Some held steady. A traffic signal at an intersection cycled, green to yellow to red.

Maya opened her eyes.

The lights weren't the ridge glow. They were grid power and storefront signs and porch fixtures left on in winter. They flickered intermittently where wind pushed snow across lines.

Under the blanket, her hands stayed tucked in, and the glasses pressed against her ribs with each breath.

The SUV rolled toward the first intersection. Exhaust steamed from a roof vent on a low building, white against the dark siding under a streetlight.

Chapter 15

The Gift

Elliot Marsh woke the way he always woke in winter now: too warm in his chest and too cold in his hands and feet. The building heat cycled, and his body never matched it. The air in the bedroom felt dry, and the skin over his knuckles pulled when he flexed his hand.

He lay still for a moment and listened.

No crying. No footsteps. No cartoon voices. Only the low, even sound of the humidifier in the living room, muffled by distance and walls.

Careful not to jolt the bed frame, he eased out of bed. The carpet under his bare feet was cold enough to make him curl his toes. After the dizziness passed, he picked up the flannel shirt he'd dropped on a chair the night before and pulled it over his T-shirt.

The hallway was dark except for a faint strip of blue light near the baseboard. It didn't reach the doorways; it just kept him from stepping on toys. He walked with the care he used at the office when someone else had paid for the furniture.

Floor-to-ceiling panes on two sides exposed the living room to city light.

Beyond the glass, building lights were visible under low cloud. Red aircraft warning lights blinked at different intervals.

Inside, everything sat where it had been placed. The coffee table was clear except for a glass of water and a phone face-down.

The tree stood in the corner near the windows.

It was tall, full, and evenly shaped. When it had arrived, the crew had handled it the way they handled high-priced deliveries, hands in gloves and eyes on corners. The trunk still had a short length of twine near the base where the VIP Titan tag had been cut off.

Warm LED lights wrapped the branches. He'd left them on steady, not the chasing pattern his kid liked, and he didn't change it.

Ornaments hung with space between them. He'd insisted. His partner had rolled her eyes and let him do it. Glass spheres, a few matte ones, some metal stars. Nothing handmade except a paper snowflake their child had cut at school and insisted belonged on the tree, crooked and intact.

The stand was hidden by a skirt, white felt cut in scallops over the rim.

His child slept on the far end of the couch under a gray throw. Small body curled on one side, one hand near the mouth. The kid's hair stuck up in a corner where the blanket had rubbed it. Elliot kept his distance.

Juniper was on the rug closer to the tree.

Juniper was a medium dog with a thick coat that had gone fully winter even though the dog lived in a condo forty stories up. Juniper lay on one hip, belly turned toward the warmer part of the room, paws loose, head on the rug. The dog's ribs rose and fell slow.

Elliot looked at them both, then turned to the fireplace.

The gas unit was set low, flame steady behind glass. A wood fire would have meant ash and smoke alarms, and the building wouldn't allow it. Gas meant a button and a number.

Kneeling, he touched the control panel. The glass was warm.

The unit responded with a steady hiss and a shift in flame height. Elliot stayed there a moment, then stood.

On the wall, the thermostat read 71.

He pressed the up arrow once.

The thermostat beeped. The number changed to 72.

He looked across the room again. Morning would be here soon, and they'd spend most of it in this room if the weather kept them in.

The humidifier sat on a side table near the couch.

It was white plastic with a small display that read 55%. The output setting showed HIGH, and the motor kept a low whirl under the room's other noises. Along the inner edges of the windows, a thin band of condensation had formed where damp air met cold glass.

His eyes went back to the tree.

The needles caught the LED light in small points. The green looked too uniform, the kind shown in brochures.

The trunk was thick at the base. The bark pattern looked regular, tight ridges and shallow grooves without the scars he expected from a tree that had lived outdoors. He reached out and rotated one ornament that had turned slightly.

His fingers brushed the needles.

They were stiff and cool. No tacky sap on his skin, no resin smell on his fingertips.

Elliot looked down toward the base of the tree.

The skirt didn't sit flat. A corner had folded under itself, leaving a small gap. The stand was a dark shape in that gap, plastic with metal hardware. If he leaned, the water reservoir was visible.

The water in the stand looked darker than he expected.

Not dirty, exactly. Low light and the trunk blocking the LEDs.

He crouched and touched the skirt edge, intending to straighten it.

His palm hovered near the floor by the stand, then higher near his chest. The air near the floor was warmer. When he slid his hand along the

felt edge, it felt damp from the humid air.

He hesitated.

He pulled the skirt out and smoothed it, hiding the stand. Afterward he rubbed his hands together once and stood.

His kid still slept.

Juniper still slept.

Elliot went to the kitchen, poured himself a small glass of water, and drank it.

He didn't turn on any lights. The glow through the windows gave enough.

When he came back, he lowered himself into the armchair across from the couch and pulled a throw blanket over his lap.

The chair faced the tree and the windows.

He watched a light move across the dark water below until his eyes blurred.

Near the tree stand, no movement showed.

His eyelids sank.

The hiss of the gas fire stayed steady.

The thermostat held its number.

The humidifier kept running.

The LEDs on the tree kept the ornaments bright points and left the corners of the room in low light.

Elliot's chin dropped toward his chest.

His breathing slowed.

Juniper slept on one hip, limbs loose, jaw slack.

Warm air from the fireplace moved along the rug and across the floor. The dog's belly stayed turned toward it. Breath moved in and out, damp in the humidified air.

Near the base of the tree, beneath the felt skirt, movement began at the edge where the stand met the floor. The skirt covered a gap; the folded corner left a channel open again. Warmer air held there, and the stand water sat a little warmer than the floor.

A white root tip pressed through.

It was glossy with moisture, no thicker than a shoelace at the widest point and tapering to a hair-thin end. The tip traced short arcs, then steadied, advancing by contact and pull.

At the felt edge, the root pressed and slid until it found the opening. When it reached open air, droplets gathered along the surface and held. Under the LEDs, the beads reflected a yellow-white point.

The tip extended to the wood near the stand. The cooler surface drew it back a fraction, then it pressed again and crossed, leaving a thin film where moisture met the floor.

Juniper's nose shifted against the rug. The dog inhaled and exhaled harder once, and the breath moved low across the rug fibers.

The root angled toward the change and continued across the wood to the seam where wood met rug. The raised edge slowed it; a touch, a pull, then the tip climbed onto the rug and settled into the fibers.

A twitch ran through Juniper's hind leg. The leg shifted, parting fur along the belly where the coat was thinner. Exposed skin warmed the air close to it, and moisture collected at the fur base.

The root lifted from the rug fibers for a moment, then set down again and advanced toward that warmer pocket.

Juniper snuffled once. The dog dragged one forepaw a few inches, exposing more belly, then took two quicker breaths before settling.

The root held during the movement, then resumed when vibration stopped.

A second root tip emerged from the stand gap.

This one was thinner. It tracked alongside the first. Where the lead tip crossed a ridge in the rug fibers, the second tip contacted it and wound around the first, increasing surface contact and keeping them aligned.

Together, the paired roots advanced toward Juniper, pressing into warmer air near the body and retracting from cooler patches. With the humidifier set at 55% on HIGH, the surfaces stayed wet enough for droplets to hold instead of drying.

Across the room, the gas fire continued its steady hiss. The thermostat stayed at 72. The LEDs stayed steady.

The roots reached the warmer area at the center of the rug where Juniper lay. Beads along their surfaces grew and merged. A few droplets ran down toward the rug and darkened fibers where they fell.

Juniper's ear twitched. The dog's eyes stayed shut.

Juniper drew in air again, deeper; the nostrils flared.

The roots moved to the edge of the warmer air near the foreleg, where fur was thick but the air above it stayed warm from body temperature. They paused.

The hair-thin end of the lead tip lifted a fraction and swept once, then lowered.

Juniper exhaled. Damp breath flowed across the foreleg.

The lead tip angled and advanced another inch.

Juniper shifted the paw, exposing the inner wrist where fur was thinner.

The roots halted during the movement. When the paw settled, they resumed.

They reached the boundary of Juniper's fur. Heat off the coat condensed another bead of water on the hair-thin end. The bead held.

The lead tip pressed forward and stopped at the fur, staying in contact with hair fibers.

Juniper's breathing remained slow.

The room stayed warm and damp. The fireplace hissed, the thermostat held, and the LEDs stayed steady while the root remained at the fur boundary and maintained contact with the warm surface.