

ROOTS OF RECKONING



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Roots of Reckoning

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Chapter 1

Homecoming

¹ The mill gates hung with two rusted locks and a Keep Out sign that had outlived the last shift horn. Mitch slowed along the gravel shoulder and watched the long sheds roll by, windows clouded with dust. The log decks were empty. Dry grass filled the deck drains. An old loader sat with its boom down, paint sun-chalked, tires splitting where the sidewalls took full sun. The place had fed half the town for a hundred years and then, in one board meeting, it shut down and sat empty.

² He rolled past the mill pond, now a brown dish with one slick of algal green along the leeward shore. The air carried pitch and diesel that had soaked into the ground. He cracked the window and tasted heat and the faint metallic bite that rose before planned burns when the county crews used to clean the slash. The second-growth beyond town stood still in the afternoon. Cedars along the fence showed brown flagging. No breeze, just the constant hum of summer power lines under load.

³ Main Street was half-shuttered. A tire shop with its door rolled up had two bays empty and a third with a truck on stands, no one in sight. The diner still had the neon coffee cup lit, but the OPEN sign was gone. He turned in at a small market where the roof sign once read Pine Mart but lost letters left it as P e M rt, which felt about right.

⁴ The bell over the market door let out a thin ring. Inside, the air moved with a fan that pushed heat instead of cold. He took a bottle of water and a sack of jerky from a shelf that still held an old display card for cigarettes. The cashier wore a visor and an apron that said Cindy. She was younger than him by a decade. She scanned the water with slow motions. The skin across her knuckles had thickened into narrow ridges. Brown

ran through them in parallel lines. They were not scrapes. They crossed the joints and did not break when she flexed.

5 He watched the pattern too long. Her eyes met his and flicked down to the counter and then up again to a point over his shoulder. The register printed a receipt. The fan clicked. Mitch forced his gaze up to her face and to the line of sweat along her temple.

6 “Cash,” he said.

7 She took the bills without touching his fingers. The ridges had clean margins. No scab. No irritation beyond a faint reddened halo. He carried the water and jerky out to the truck and breathed against a pinch in his chest that had nothing to do with heat.

8 He parked where the asphalt gave out into gravel along the corner. The sun hung over the northern hill and turned the glass of the ForestLife building into a hard shine. White trucks filled the lot in bulls-eye rows. A drone pad sat on a flat roof edge, vacant. Through the heat shimmer, he saw the reflection of sky and the tidy edges of steel cladding. The company had dropped a second city on top of Pineridge, the way out-of-town builders had set cabins in gated compounds along the lake. Only this place was not for visitors. He had driven long roads to get here and had known about the building from photos and calls. They’d call it a campus. Clean glass up there; plywood and shut doors down here. All he saw were white trucks and a drone pad. His molars met.

9 At the filling station across from the market, a man rubbed his forearm. He scraped at his skin with two fingers. Tiny flakes came away and drifted down to the asphalt. The surface under his fingers had a woodgrain pattern twisted around the ulna. When Mitch’s eyes caught it, the man rotated. Not a full turn. Enough to close off the view and put the pump between them. He kept his head down and let the pump meter tick. A boy in the back of the man’s truck watched the action with a blank face and a smear of dirt across his cheek. The boy’s hand clutched a plastic toolbox with a cracked handle.

¹⁰ Mitch drank half the water standing at the door of his truck. The label peeled from the bottle under his thumb. He felt the ridge of the label edge and wanted to press it into the skin of his palm until the sensation changed to something he could name. He capped the bottle and put the jerky sack in the glove box, then shut it with more force than the truck required.

¹¹ Pine Grove Cemetery sat two blocks south and a little east of the Caldwell house. He drove the short way and cut the engine at the chain across the dirt pullout. Heat rose from the lot through his boots. The tall firs at the edge of the cemetery stood quiet. Their roots had already woven under the graves a generation ago, before the facility, before the modern words for what was happening. He walked past the stone for Mrs. Kline who had kept the library, past the row of VFW flags that had not been replaced this year, to the newer stones in the back where the clay was brighter and the grass patchy.

¹² Howard's stone had a simple cut: name, dates, the words LOVED FATHER below. No scripture. No flourish. The dirt at the edges had split. Two thin saplings had pushed up through the seam where the ground met the concrete border. The stems were pale and soft where they bent toward the sun. Their leaves were small but already formed into opposite pairs with fine serration at the edges. Mitch crouched and pressed a fingertip to one. The cell walls gave easily and sprang back. He traced the crack in the soil with a slow movement. A root hair ran along it in a fine line, white against brown.

¹³ He put his palm flat on the border and left it there. The stone was warm. He counted rough ridges on the concrete with his thumb in a habit he had not shaken since boyhood when he counted rings on stumps to quiet his head. The names around him were cut into granite with dates he could equate with men and women he had known by voice and laugh. He stood and blood rose through him. Sound thinned. He did not talk to the stone. He checked the saplings again for detail, then broke off nothing and put nothing back.

14 On the way to the house, he drove slower than was needed and let the tires run the center line, dodging a soda can and a blown-out retread. The Caldwell house sat two blocks from the cemetery, roof shingles curling at the edges. The porch sagged a little where the posts had shifted, the deck boards dry and pale. He used his key and stepped into still hot air inside the house. The living room held the same couch and Howard's chair with the arm worn smooth where a hand had knocked rings into a pattern over years. There was dust on the TV and a ring under a glass on the side table.

15 In the kitchen, Emma had claimed the table and built a lab. A USB microscope sat on a stack of books and a proper binocular scope took the other end. Lamps on articulated arms lit a tray with paired slides. A box of nitrile gloves perched by the sink next to a rack of vials marked in black pen with dates and short codes. He read a few: RES 7/2, RES 7/10, SW-plant tap 7/14. A small centrifuge with an orange lid sat beside a rack that had once held spice jars. The jars were gone. In their place, pipettes in a coffee mug and a folded paper printout.

16 Emma stood with her hand on the back of a chair. Dark hair pulled into a bun with a pencil through it. The collar of her shirt high. A pale color under her skin where the sun reached her throat. Her position had the kind of stillness that came after moving nonstop.

17 “You made it,” she said.

18 “Yeah.” He kept his keys in his palm and placed them down too slow.

19 She glanced at his shirt, his boots, the line of sweat on his brow.

20 “You look tired.”

21 “Drove through.”

22 “Why now?” The words were clean. No cushion.

23 He opened the fridge and let cold hit his face. Shelves, labels, the egg carton. He kept his eyes there; easier than on her. There was a jar of

pickles, a carton of eggs, two bottles of water, a squeeze bottle of mustard. He took one water out and closed the door.

24 “Figured it was time,” he said.

25 “You had time before.”

26 “Not when hospice called at dawn and they needed you to sign,” she said.

27 He looked down at the table and slid a finger along the microscope base.

28 “Yeah.” He left the apology where it sat.

29 She softened nothing.

30 “They’re running new crews through this week,” she said.

31 “Crews?”

32 “Containment, inspections, public health. Different badges, same trucks. They set up the triage clinic down by the community center. You see the complex?”

33 He nodded.

34 “Hard to miss.”

35 She moved to the bench and shifted a slide.

36 “There’s a lake of money up that hill,” she said.

37 The chair legs scraped when he pulled one back. Sitting, he set his forearms on the table but kept his palms down. An old twinge ran in the scar track of his right hand, and something else under the heel he assigned to the wheel grip and too many miles. He angled his arm so the underside faced away from her without making it obvious.

38 “Want to show me?” He nodded at the equipment.

39 “Not yet.” She tapped a label on a vial.

40 “What are those?”

41 “Samples.”

42 “Of what?”

43 “You’re late enough already,” she said. The words had an old bruise in them.

44 He pushed his chair back and stood.

45 “Workshop still locked?”

46 “Yes,” she said.

47 He walked down the hall past the laundry closet. The workshop door took a shoulder and then the key. The hinges had held up. The room held cedar dust and old oil. Howard had organized screws in jars by size and type, lids screwed onto a plank so the jars hung below. The workbench held a vise and the saw marks from a hundred quick cuts. The chainsaw sat on a shelf with the bar oiled and the chain cover on. A cardboard box with receipts sat under the bench. The hammer with the split handle he’d promised to re-haft last winter still leaned under the bench. He stood in the doorway and did not go further. His stomach went tight and his shoulders dropped, and it was easier to stand than to try to sort what of this was going to be hard and what was going to be impossible.

48 When he came back out, Emma had a glass of water on the counter. She did not say anything about the workshop. They stood in the kitchen without touching anything. The house creaked in the heat, the kind of sound wood made when moisture dropped and fibers tightened.

49 A white truck rolled slow along the street outside. The window over the sink gave a strip view of the side yard and the street. The truck carried the ForestLife logo in clean blue. The cab held two silhouettes. The bed had a plastic crate with a coil of hose. The truck idled at the corner, then drifted forward at a speed that said it was not in a hurry. Emma turned her head and tracked it with a steady face. No comment. No obvious fear. That stillness again, not the calm of a person who felt safe but the kind

that kept energy in a narrow channel.

50 “They’re doing sweeps,” she said in a voice that matched the truck’s pace.

51 “For what?”

52 “They call it services. Persistent symptoms get a card for the clinic. Cough. Fever. Skin changes. Other things. People go because what else do you do.”

53 He nodded once.

54 “We’ll go look tomorrow,” she said.

55 He watched the truck reach the corner and ease on. The street held its quiet, but the quiet now carried a ridge under it.

56 “You sure that’s smart?”

57 “You want to see. You’ll see.”

58 He set his teeth.

59 “We lay low tonight,” he said.

60 “Good.”

61 She turned off one lamp and then the other and moved through the house with a practiced economy. He stayed in the kitchen and drank his water and checked the band of leather on his wrist without actually looking at it. He felt the house around him and the hill above the town and the roots below both.

62 He woke in the dark to heat burning in his right palm. Not a cut. A throb. Still, he tested his fingers and found each one could move. Turning the wrist sharpened it, and something gave at the skin’s surface, a point going out where points should not go. He sat up with a suddenness that

took the covers with him and let the old bed frame creak. He held his hand to the streetlight that leaked through the blinds. The light gave him a shape and a line of shine. He needed more.

63 He stood and walked the hallway to the kitchen with the careful steps of someone who knew where the loose boards were. The overhead stayed off. He clicked the lamp on the bench. The cone of yellow lit the counter. He held his hand in it and saw the truth. A hard point had breached the skin of his palm at the fat pad opposite the thumb. The skin had cracked along a tight oval. A small length of wood pushed through. Not a splinter from a board. This had a clean taper and a smooth surface where the skin had never touched a board today or yesterday. The tissue around it had swelled. A bead of blood formed along the base and then stopped as if it had met a barrier that was not normal dermis. His heart kicked once hard and then matched the new pace of the pain.

64 “No,” he said, into the quiet.

65 He pinched the protrusion with his left thumb and forefinger and pulled. The wood did not move. He increased pressure until his thumb and forefinger whitened. The sensation pulled deep inside his hand. Not superficial. Something held from within. He went to the drawer under the microwave and took out needle-nose pliers and a small bottle of rubbing alcohol. He poured alcohol over the pliers and wiped them on a dish towel.

66 He gripped the wood again with the pliers and pulled steadily, an even force the way he had learned to free a stuck nail without splintering the board. The line of blood widened and then ran. The splinter did not come. He felt the tie run into the cords under his palm. He saw a thin green at the join where blood beaded. It mixed with red and changed the color along the edges to a brown-green smear. He let go and leaned his hip on the counter and breathed through his nose to keep from vomiting.

67 “Fuck,” he said, low.

68 He had worked log decks with two fingers taped together and sawdust in his lungs. He had taken kicks to his ribs from falling branches he misjudged and walked it off. Not a bruise. Not an infection. A point of wood pushing from him, same drift he'd seen at the pump, at the register, at the grave.

69 He reached for the paper towels, wrapped his palm, flattened the tape on the wrap, then wound gauze from a box under the sink he had not noticed before. The gauze stuck to the blood. He breathed and looked at the doorway. Feet on the hallway carpet. Emma's step moved, then stopped. He turned off the lamp with his elbow and stood in the dark until his eyes adjusted again. The footsteps receded. Water ran in the bathroom. A door clicked. He stood very still.

70 He slid open the back door and stepped onto the porch. The boards under his feet had cooled. The night carried resin and something sweet from flowering shrubs. No car moved. A dog barked two streets over and then did not bark again. He leaned on the post with his left shoulder and held his right hand away from his body.

71 Down the cross street, headlights approached slow, cut their beam just before the corner, then eased past. The lead vehicle carried a ForestLife emblem and an amber lightbar that pulsed without a siren. The second vehicle followed at a measured distance. He heard radio voices, a low wash of syllables without content, and held his breath until both turned at the far intersection and fell out of direct sight.

72 He pressed his wrapped palm to the porch post. The post was old Douglas-fir, dense, with the growth rings tight. He placed the skin and wood against wood. A deep tug inside his palm loosened in proportion to how hard he pressed. He frowned and pressed harder. The relief scaled to the contact and held a second after he eased off, then returned when he broke contact. A slow pull of moisture moved beneath the grain against his skin. He did it again, because his body told him what worked and he had learned a long time ago to listen to bodies under load. The thin saplings at Howard's stone came to mind. He pictured the wall studs and

the joists and the tree that had been the post and the route water had taken through xylem while it was alive. He did not dress the thought in words. He stood and held his hand there until his breathing slowed.

73 Back through the kitchen to the hall: no movement. He rewrapped to cover any bleed-through and tucked the hand under the hem of his shirt. Not until the clinic. He held steady and left it there.

74 He went back to bed with the wrap tight. He lay on his back and stared into the dark and counted until he lost the count. When sleep came, it brought no image. Only the steady night inside the house and the draw of water toward the lowest places.

75 Sleep broke in pieces. More than once his hand found the bedframe, pressed, and eased only when wood met the wrap.

76 Morning brought heat earlier than it used to. Light came through the blinds in a pale strip. They had lingered in a drought pattern that moved rain north or stalled it in a wall offshore and passed the town by. The house gave small cracks and clicks as it shifted into day. Mitch stood at the sink with his back to the window and his bandaged hand at his side and watched coffee run through the filter. He took the mug black and let the heat sit against his lip until his mouth stopped its tremor. No use of the right hand; no flex he didn't need.

77 Emma came in with a stack of paper maps held crosswise against her hip. She paused in the doorway, eyes holding him, and ran a thumb along the edge of the stack until the paper clicked. She took in the sweat at his hairline, the set of his jaw, and, most of all, the way he cradled his hand a fraction away from his body to reduce accidental touch.

78 "What did you do?"

79 He set the coffee down.

80 “Hurt it on the road,” he said.

81 She lifted an eyebrow that was not amused.

82 “You’re not holding it like a cut. You’re guarding it.”

83 “It’s a splinter.”

84 “From what?”

85 He gave a line of silence. She watched that silence.

86 “Show me,” she said.

87 “Not now.” The quickness of his answer put air between them. He softened the next bit without much success.

88 “We’re going to the clinic anyway. I’ll let them deal with it then.”

89 She set the maps down and leaned on the counter a foot from him. He caught a faint green at the edge of her collar where light hit the skin and then lost it when a cloud shifted and changed the angle.

90 “The clinic is a funnel,” she said.

91 “Funnel to what?”

92 “Up the hill. If they think you’re progressing, you don’t go home. You go into the backend. Processing and monitoring. And then you don’t see family again except as a schedule.”

93 “Heard or saw?”

94 “Saw traffic patterns. Saw who went in and who came out. Watched schedules. Green-stamped cards triggered return texts with time stamps. Orange-cornered cards didn’t.”

95 “That’s not proof,” he said. The words came out harder than he meant. He held onto the hardness to cover the way his thumb wanted to press against the wrap.

96 “You want proof, you go with me and keep your hand hidden,” she said.

97 “You going to show me any of this?” He motioned to the table with his chin.

98 “After we’re back,” she said.

99 He blew air out through his nose and nodded.

100 “Fine.”

101 She stared at him for one more second, then pointed at the chair.

102 “Wrap it again tighter. We’re not getting stopped for a sign of infection.”

103 He did as told. The fresh gauze stuck to the previous layer. He slid the leather strap down from his wrist and buckled it around the wrap so it looked like a brace instead of a bandage. She handed him a backpack. It had a water bottle, a small first-aid kit, and a pack of trail mix. She kept moving, checking the side pocket for the folded map. She had a calm that came from repeated runs and revised routes.

104 “We cut behind the lots behind the laundromat and the auto shop,” she said.

105 “You been doing this a while.”

106 “A bit.”

107 He felt the old charge in his legs that came before stepping into terrain you do not control. He let it run. He did not name fear and did not call it anything else. It ran anyway.

108 They left the house by the back door and moved along the fence line to the alley. The neighbor’s garbage can stood with the lid off and a wasp traced a spiral above it. The alley ran between backyards where grass had turned to pale blades and the earth showed through. The only moisture sat where a hose had dripped and made one dark patch, and in that patch two shoots had already come up with leaves still folded from the stem.

109 At the corner, a woman stood waiting for a ride that had not arrived. She kept her face angled slightly away as they passed. A ridge of hardened tissue lifted along her right cheek. The surface had fine fissures. She held her jaw in a clamp that turned the muscle under the skin into a line. She did not look at them. She did not respond when Emma said, “Morning.” The woman watched the empty street beyond the houses with the stare of someone who had decided not to blink because blinking might invite a fresh wave of attention.

110 Mitch and Emma kept moving. The drone came from the west, quiet, then changed pitch once. It shifted its orientation and paused. Emma’s shoulders went still and high. She did not look up. They took one more step under a maple whose leaves had curled at the edges from heat stress. The drone held a second longer, then moved on. The sound fell away up the hill to the north.

111 “They’re logging patterns,” Emma said under her breath.

112 “I know.” He wanted to cover his hand with his other hand but did not. He adjusted the strap on his shoulder instead and kept his gaze ahead.

113 They crossed behind the auto shop where a row of cars waited for work that would not come this week. A dog under a porch growled once and came to the edge of its tether and then decided the shade mattered more. Emma led through a gap where two fences did not quite meet. Mitch went sideways and tucked his injured hand against his body to keep from brushing the rough edge of cut cedar. He smelled the raw wood and clenched his back molars when the ache in his palm eased against the pressure he could no longer pretend was accidental.

114 “Two more blocks, then we can see the clinic door from the corner,” Emma said.

115 “You don’t want to walk straight up to it.”

116 “I want you to see the intake without meeting it.”

117 They moved along the back of a lot where tomato cages held up vines with yellow leaves that had never seen a real rain this season. A child's plastic pool sat upside down with a line of ants working the rim. In the distance, a rotor beat turned over once and faded. The hospital's old helipad had been repainted last month; the drone now traced that same approach.

118 Emma stopped at the end of the block and set her hand out to slow him a fraction. She listened. He listened too. Out here, he heard different things than around machines. There was no wind. There was the faint shush of tires on the highway a mile east. There was a voice on a speaker somewhere near the community center asking people to form a line. He did not need to see the crowd to know what shape it took. He had stood in lines at job gates and at clinics. The sound of patience under strain had a specific tone. It was measurable in decibels and in how his ribs took it.

119 They cut left and then right into a narrow passage between cinder block and chain-link and came out into the shadow of a sycamore. The bark plates on the trunk had begun to lift in broader patches. The ground below held leaves too dry for the month. The clinic's front door sat across a short parking lot. A banner called it a COMMUNITY HEALTH PARTNER SITE in clean font. A person with a green vest and a clipboard checked people in. Two people with soft body armor and company badges stood ten yards behind the check-in point and pretended to help. A woman held a baby in a sun-bleached blanket. A man with a denim vest stood and rubbed his jaw where a roughness ran along bone beneath skin.

120 Emma pointed with her chin. Mitch took the scene in with a mechanic's attention. Intake. Sorting. Badges. The walk from check-in to a corridor they could not see. He felt the shape in his palm and did not let his left hand reach across his body. He felt the heat of the day building and the cool of the sycamore shade. He listened for the rotors again and heard only a single buzz of a drone that came and went. Emma timed the rhythm, counting under her breath to thirty between each clipboard lift.

121 They stayed in the shade. They did not speak. The line moved a person at a time. A white truck rolled past the far curb, slow.

122 “Ready?” Emma asked as the guard’s eyes swept the street.

123 “Yeah,” he said, without looking at her. He tasted the copper of old blood he remembered from biting the inside of his cheek when the log yard foreman had asked him a question and then answered it himself. He lifted the strap of his pack. Across the lot, a man at the head of the line stepped through the door and into fluorescent light, his shape lost past the threshold. The clipboard paused. A guard’s gaze lifted. “We move when the clipboard lifts,” Emma said.

Chapter 2

Beneath the Skin

124 The clipboard lifted.

125 Emma moved first. No rush. A steady walk that matched the heat and the measured way the guards watched the line. Mitch fell in at her shoulder, head down, strap across his chest. The sycamore shade held them for five paces, then sun hit and the lot baked. The banner over the door kept its clean letters: COMMUNITY HEALTH PARTNER SITE. Inside, fluorescent hum and chemical odor over old gym varnish. A table with hand sanitizer bottles and unopened tissue boxes. A clipboard station to the right where a woman in a green vest gave out cards and performed concern in short phrases.

126 “Afternoon,” she said, already moving to the next in line.

127 The hallway beyond narrowed into a bent elbow. A guard in soft armor stood with feet planted and a badge that caught light but no names. Ten yards in, Emma touched Mitch’s elbow and angled him into a short side alcove where the wall recessed for a set of vending machines. A door with STAFF ONLY stenciled in flaking paint sat half open on a mop sink and a stacked box of gloves.

128 “Two breaths,” she said.

129 “I’m fine,” he said.

130 She took a compact penlight from her pocket and kept her voice low. “Let me see how it responds. Wrapped. I don’t need skin.”

131 “No.” His hand twitched back by reflex. He took in the doorway, the corners, the guard’s shadow moving across the hall. The pain had

been a straight line since dawn and he had managed it by pressure and not thinking.

132 “Mitch,” she said. Not soft. The name as instruction. “We’re in a pocket right now. Thirty seconds.”

133 He let the strap go and extended his right hand, the gauze and the leather strap snugged over it, the buckle turned under to avoid glint. She cupped her palm under his hand so the light stayed focused. The beam crossed the gauze. Through two layers, a green came up, faint at first and then clearer where the fibers thinned. The ache changed at the same pace as the green, pigments under the gauze shifting with the beam. Less pressure at the nerve, more ease across the pad that had been a constant knot since midnight. His breath hitched once and settled. The relief landed so fast it scared him worse than the hurt.

134 “Light is doing something,” she said, measuring each word. “Keep it covered except when you have to. If you can choose the light, do.”

135 He nodded once. The gauze glowed a fraction even after she clicked the penlight off. He tightened his jaw and buckled the strap again to the notch it had sat on that morning.

136 She took the light and turned it to her own wrist. Nothing for a third of a heartbeat, then a tint in the tiny vessels under the skin rose and tracked to the light’s center. It wasn’t dramatic. It was present. She swallowed, clicked the beam away, and let her sleeve fall over her wrist.

137 “Noted: somatic response,” she murmured.

138 “Okay,” she said. “We’re here to watch. Not to get carded.”

139 Carded meant recorded. Recorded meant sorted. They stepped out and took their place at the bend with the others. The guard turned his head a fraction as they came back into the main hallway. No alarm. No nod either.

140 At the table, a woman in a floral mask described her cough as seasonal. The green vest wrote something on a line and handed a card

across with a practiced motion that left a tiny space between fingertips. The scanner at the interior door chirped every other person. A guard tapped his ForestLife badge to the plate; chirp, left path; a resident held up a paper card; no chirp, chairs. The ones with a chirp went left into the fluorescent; the ones without went to folding chairs against the wall where a volunteer slid a blood pressure cuff up an arm and wrote the numbers on a pad.

¹⁴¹ A pair of wheels squeaked. An older man came through the outside doors in a loaner chair pushed by a neighbor. His breath carried cedar, two days old, stale now but still there. Pitch clung to clothes for longer than people remembered. His daughter tried to keep up as the chair went forward. A guard moved a step, gave her a palm-out gesture, and held her there without saying a word. She set her hand on the chair handle. The guard's hand landed on hers and lifted it away with a slow, full motion. The man's head turned toward the scent of her shampoo and he frowned and then smoothed his face as if that would make anything in front of him more workable.

¹⁴² "Hey," the daughter said. "I'm with him."

¹⁴³ "Please wait," said the guard. "We'll give you an update."

¹⁴⁴ "What kind. Of update." Each word came separate and heavy. She reached for the chair again. The guard shifted and filled the space. The chair continued through the scanner and the chirp hit a higher pitch than before. The neighbor who had pushed the chair mouthed an apology and let go. Mitch kept his right hand against his own thigh to keep from touching anything and looked past the guard at the interior door where the light changed tone, warmer in the waiting hall and stark white deeper in.

¹⁴⁵ Emma let half the line pass. Then she tilted her chin. They moved with a group of two and then three, keeping their shoulders angled so their faces stayed half away from the camera bubble tucked into the umbrella of the exit sign. At the threshold, a guard held up a hand.

146 “Purpose today?”

147 “Exposure to someone who’s having symptoms,” Emma said.

148 “Names?”

149 She slid her phone out, opened a notes app, and showed a typed list of initials and dates. The guard looked without touching. He tapped his own badge to the plate; the scanner chirped a low tone. “Right,” he said. “Wait over there.”

150 They took the last two chairs. The heat was higher inside than out. The sound was wrong. A gym did not make sense under this light and smell, and all the echo had been padded out of it by bodies and the soft scrape of nylon jackets and shoe rubber.

151 A nurse in a green vest with a second badge below it came from the curtain area and said, “Advanced cases this way.” She never said symptoms, never said diagnosis. She walked without looking at faces. She looked at hands. She looked at wrists. She looked at necks.

152 A boy in a striped shirt stood one down from Mitch. Ridge lines along his temples made shallow waves under the skin hairline. He kept his head tipped so hair fell forward. His mother pressed his hand and said, “I’m here. You’re fine. They’re going to check your throat.” The boy watched her mouth and nodded. A security man came, gentle voice, flat words.

153 “We’ll be quick,” the man said.

154 “No,” the mother said.

155 “Policy.”

156 The guard peeled their hands apart and did it with an angle that made it look like a guide instead of a removal until the last second, when her fingers flexed and his grip changed and became what it had been the whole time. Latex creaked; the mother’s knuckles whitened. The boy made no sound. Mitch’s jaw popped; he tightened the leather strap across his palm and set his teeth on the edge of pain he could own. His vision

narrowed to their hands. He held one breath and let it out slow.

157 A gurney went past toward a side exit. No one announced it. It did not go deeper into curtains as triage would. It angled toward a door with a beige scanner and a set of metal stanchions that made a short runway out of tape and posts. A scanner sat there too, smaller than the one up front. Emma's eyes flicked to it. They exchanged nothing in words.

158 When the nurse turned her head for a moment, Emma stood as if to adjust her chair. Mitch stood with her. Two steps took them to the service door with the faded STAFF ONLY paint. It opened to the outside air that sat heavy and a strip of shadow between the building and a chain-link run. A white van waited with its engine on and the rear doors open. The side windows had cages bolted inside behind the glass. Two men in matching polo shirts with ForestLife insignia stood by the bumper with their hands on the lower edge of the door frame.

159 A man in a denim vest without sleeves stood between the gurney and the door. "This isn't treatment," he said. "He can breathe. He's just hot."

160 "Sir," said a woman in a crisp shirt with a badge clipped at her belt. She carried the smoothness of someone who trained others. "Policy is to move advanced cases offsite for monitoring. We'll follow up with family. Please step aside."

161 "Where." The man sounded like he knew he wouldn't get an answer. He had to ask anyway. He took a half step where his body wanted to go and hit the wall of a guard's chest. The guard's reaction was muscle before thought. He moved his feet to widen his own base. The woman raised two fingers and the men at the doors adjusted their grips.

162 Mitch started forward without a plan. Emma's hand caught his sleeve at the tricep and held with a grip he would have had trouble breaking without making noise and scene. "Not here," she said, just breath.

163 The van took the gurney. Doors shut. The hinges squealed, then thudded into their seat and the latches bit. The engine tone rose and the van rolled out across the asphalt and took the lane that led north, up the hill. No siren, no rush.

164 “We follow,” Emma said.

165 He was already moving.

166 They didn’t have speed. They had angle and shortcuts. The van took the through street and stayed inside the speed limit to keep optics clean. Emma pulled Mitch through a gap in a fence where someone had bent chain-link up two feet and left it. They ran a cut along the backs of houses where grass had burned out to blond and dusty. Shoe rubber on dry soil made a sound that didn’t travel. A side yard held an old boat on blocks with a tarp over it and a raccoon’s tracks in the dust.

167 At the edge of town, a service lane came up behind the electrical substation and climbed the lower slope of the hill. The ground here had small stones set by last winter’s freeze, and the dirt kept the memory of wheels. They took that up until chain-link rose ahead and ran left-right across the slope. The fence on the perimeter had three courses of barbed wire across the top. Down-slope, cameras on poles turned in slow, repeating arcs. No personification to it. Just a loop programmed by someone who would never stand here.

168 They found cover in a shallow swale where blackberry had gone woody. From there, the road below the gate sat in clean view. The van they had tailed slowed. A man walked from the guard station to the keypad and put in a sequence without looking down at his hand. The gate made a contained rumble and slid. The van went in. Another guard picked up a clipboard, wrote nothing, then put the clipboard down. The gate rolled back and locked into place. The whole thing had a rhythm that

did not care who watched.

169 “Count it,” Mitch said, quiet.

170 Emma did in her head. “From stop to open, twelve seconds.” She listened to the motor. “Close came with a short hum and a latch.” She pointed in a short motion. “Side door for service. Row of air handlers there. Maintenance entry.”

171 The air units stood on pads. Two had new paint. One had a drip stain dark down the side where condensate didn’t catch right. A short door with a crash bar faced away from the main flow of traffic. It had a combination lock plate and a tiny camera bubble tucked under a drip edge.

172 A man came from the far side of the building. The skin from wrist to elbow bore raised plates and troughs, brown along the edges where oil lived and pale in the centers. He stumbled at the gate groove, put a hand out, and touched the arm of a guard in a way that said he still thought touch settled things. The guard pulled back a half step so fast it wasn’t training anymore, then reset into a stance and pointed to the inner door. The man went where the finger pointed. The guard smoothed the front of his vest with an open palm he wanted to look calm.

173 Mitch tracked every motion without translating. The pad, the hand at the code, whether knuckles flexed. The interval of the gate. Who scanned first, the driver or the escort. The model of camera dome and the range by the angle of its hood.

174 He took a breath to count and lost the thread. Something under the ground pressed back at his attention and pulled. A press. Under the ground. Pulling. Not metaphor. A pull in the body that lived in the pads of feet and the bones of the ankles and the hard tendons at the back of the knee. It had direction. It had density. It led under the fence and under the slab and went deeper than he could track before it blurred. He set a hand out to catch his balance on a blackberry cane and Emma grabbed his jacket before he slid into its thorns.

175 “What is it?”

176 “Water,” he said. His voice was too loud for the swale, so he took it down. “Lines. Main. There.” He gestured with his chin to the right. “And there. Two depths. Slow one under both. Deeper.”

177 “Reservoir feed and return,” she said, guessing. “Or the plant loop.”

178 He pressed his palm against his own thigh, through the denim, until the pain backed up into a more familiar shape his body knew how to put in a corner. He nodded once. “It’s pulling.”

179 “We’ll test it later,” she said. “You got it. File it. Not here.”

180 He closed his mouth on the next line of numbers that wanted to come out as distances. He could measure them and it would help one day, not this second.

181 A second van turned up the road and hit the lower camera’s sweep. It slowed at the same point. It leaned a fraction to the left; weight sat wrong inside, a shift of cargo. He knew the school’s direction, knew every approach to this hill from a hundred days hauling saws to the upper lots. The second guard used the same pad, and the same slot in the habit opened a door.

182 A drone hum grew from the west. Not a helicopter. High whine and a mild beat under it when the angle changed. Emma tilted her head for half a second, then flattened to the swale. Mitch followed. The drone moved in an arc that kept the fence and the gate in view. It did not drop. It did not hover over. It ran the same sweep every pass and would run it again tomorrow.

183 “Out,” she said. “Now.”

184 They slid down the far side of the swale and found a shallow drainage that ran down the hill in a straight line. The ditch had a thin strip of damp in the bottom from a leak that had not been repaired. Mitch felt it without putting his eyes on it. Overhead, the drone tracked its arc

across the fence line and the gate pad. They held under the thorn and grass until the lens cleared their side and began its return. Mitch set a hand to the scrub for balance; gravel pressed at his knee. On the blind side of the sweep they moved at a crouch, feet placed heel-to-toe, and didn't rise until the ditch opened to the low field at the back of the old feed store.

185 They didn't talk across town. The cut-overs and alleys they used did not allow for it. He let his hand find wood when it could: the raw edge of a fence plank, the post of a gate. Each contact took the tightness down a notch and allowed one more block.

186 By the time they hit the street two over from the Caldwell house, he had built a map he didn't need anymore for the route and couldn't stop building anyway. Resin and dust mixed with the exhaust of a truck that needed rings. The house sat as it had sat with the roof curling a little more each summer. He went in the back, grabbed keys from the counter where he had placed them, did not look at the microscope or the slides, and came back out.

187 Emma already sat on the passenger side with the door shut so the latch wouldn't sound twice. He started the engine and let it idle for two breaths to even out the throttle that still stuck at first touch.

188 "Go east two blocks. Take the cut road up," she said.

189 "Got it."

190 They made the climb to the gravel pullout that gave a look over the town and the hill. It wasn't high. It was enough. The light had moved to late-afternoon angle. Smoke from somewhere two counties away had drifted thin over the ridge and left it brown.

191 Mitch set the brake and leaned back. He let the wheel hold his hands while his ankles leaned a fraction toward town. The soles reported a right-of-center weight. Balance drifted and came back; his breath caught and let go with a small shake. He did not close his eyes for long. Just enough to let the map he had been trying not to admit existed

assemble itself into two lines that crossed under the east side of town and one deeper basin that sat under the whole thing and fed both. Numbers came in a column with the same authority he had given board-feet and bucking angles.

192 “Twenty-eight feet to the main at Cherry and Third,” he said without deciding to. “Forty-five to the return that runs the block south. Deeper at the plant. Deeper, slow under all that. Holding.” A threshold. Load response. His grip tightened on the wheel.

193 “Okay,” Emma said. Protective and not patronizing. “That’s data.” Her hand hovered and did not land on his shoulder.

194 He opened his eyes. The world did not tilt. It was the same pullout with the same broken bottle in the dirt and the same ring of cigarette filters near the guardrail. His hand pulsed once under the strap and then steadied.

195 Her phone gave a single tone. She looked at the screen and rotated it so he could see without adjusting his position.

196 Stay home tonight. Curfew.

197 No sender name. Just a number that did not map to anyone she had in her lists. He watched her thumb move to the trash icon and hold there for a second. She let the message go.

198 “We need Howard,” she said. She did not have to add what. He heard the lift of her breath on the end of the name.

199 He nodded. The last weeks of Howard’s life lived in the tight place below Mitch’s ribs. The missed calls lived there too. He had kept those late-night rings in the drawer where he kept everything else he didn’t manage. He looked at the ridge where the complex sat and felt a shape to the word need that didn’t ask anything of him he could avoid.

200 He put the truck into gear. “Let’s go.”

201 They dropped back into town. Two ForestLife SUVs passed going the other direction with their lightbars dead and their drivers not looking

left or right. The pace of the vehicles did not match the reduced traffic. It matched the way a person walked through a room when the thing they wanted sat there and they already had their hand on it.

202 At the stop sign by the old post office, Mitch flexed his fingers on the wheel. The pulse where the splinter sat matched his heartbeat. Not an image. Not a symbol. A rate. He loosened his grip one notch to keep the wrap from rubbing against the inside of the strap.

203 They did not talk for the next six blocks. The truck's tires made their sound over the patched asphalt. The last light of the day drew the edges of the roofs into hard lines. He checked mirrors out of habit and not because it would change anything if the SUVs behind them decided to alter their route.

204 At their street, he turned without using the full arc of the wheel. The house came into view. He parked two doors down instead of out front. He looked once at the Douglas-fir post on the porch and felt his hand respond with a pain he could navigate by. Emma had her hand on the door handle already. They stepped out as a unit and moved.

205 Between the truck and the house, a dry wind came from the west for two seconds, enough to make the leaves of the street maple turn their lighter sides to the sun and then drop again. The air tasted metallic for a moment, the way it did before they lit controlled burns on the other side of the county when the humidity played along. He filed that too without reaching for it.

206 "Keys," Emma said at the back step.

207 He held the strap against the lip of the step as he climbed to keep pressure on the pad in his palm, and then he unlocked the door. Inside, the air held its heat and the clean smell of alcohol and plastic. The table still had Emma's lab on it.

208 She tapped two fingers toward the front windows, and Mitch drew the plastic slats down; the cords rasped, then he left them tipped so pale bars lay across the floor. Outside, the truck engine ticked as it cooled

and the house clicked as heat dropped. They stood by the table until the hum of the refrigerator became the loudest sound in the rooms. The workshop off the hall held Howard's notebooks and drives.

209 "We do this fast," she said.

210 Mitch nodded. He set his bandaged hand to the edge of the table and let the pressure reduce the noise in his blood just enough to work.

Chapter 3

Family Roots

²¹¹ The workshop door gave under the key and a shoulder. Cedar dust lifted with the move and hung close. The room held the same order it always had: jars of screws in labeled rows, the bench with its old vise, the chainsaw on a shelf with a rag over the bar, the hammer with the split handle. Behind the bench a narrow door sat that Mitch hadn't opened before. Black electrical tape crossed its latch with his father's cramped initials and a date. He pinched the end of the tape with his left hand and peeled it back. The tape snapped once and came free.

²¹² Cold air moved up the short run of steps when he opened the door. The smell underneath was damp concrete and potting soil. Emma flicked the light switch to the right. One bulb came on at the far end of the room, not bright enough to reach corners. The space had a poured slab and two low tables. A dehumidifier sat unplugged with a pilot light dead. On the nearer table a small TV waited next to a plastic tote with drives inside wrapped in paper towels and painter's tape with dates in his father's handwriting.

²¹³ "Power strip," Emma said.

²¹⁴ Mitch found one on a pegboard hook, plugged it in, and set it to live. He did it with his left hand, the leather strap on his right kept tight. He angled his wrist so the buckle stayed turned under. Emma set the TV on the table edge and pushed the button with her thumb. The blue LED came on. She picked the top drive from the tote and turned it in her hands to see the port. Her fingers were steady. She sat it home into the cable and hit input.

215 Howard's face filled the screen. Gaunt, wood-grained along the throat, eyes that didn't blink often enough. He had put the camera at eye height on a shelf. He wore a gray sweatshirt with a stain at the collar.

216 "Day fourteen," he said. The first words came rough, then steadied. "Cambium extracts bind. We saw that early. Auxin and cytokinin cues gave fast closure over cuts. This is the part they wouldn't write down." He leaned in without moving his feet. "Put their mix into treated municipal water and it goes off spec. Chlorine isn't neutral. Nitrification cycles aren't neutral. It binds to lignin, yes, and under a cut it grabs human collagen and keratin. Not a pathogen. Adhesion: fast, indiscriminate sealing. Integration."

217 He coughed once. He lifted a glass labeled in Sharpie, didn't drink. "They'll call it rumor until it lands as numbers. They'll tell you to trust the process they bought. If you're hearing this, I didn't have time to show you."

218 "This isn't a curse. It's a reaction. Change the medium, change the result. I said that. They closed the door."

219 Emma's hand hovered near the screen without touching it. Mitch put his palm flat to the table edge and let the pressure steady his pulse. In the screen light, the tissue at the edge of Emma's collar took on a faint green that blinked out when the image changed.

220 She clicked through the list of files. Dates. File sizes. She picked one stamped three weeks before Howard's death. The camera cut to night. Grainy, steady. The sound was local and windless. The reservoir held its flat shape with a small ripple against rock. The frame tilted until the water intake showed a black seam. Howard's shoulder moved across at the edge. He stepped in with a carboy that had a shipping label scraped off and a hand-written warning left at the corner. He set the lip at the edge of the intake and tipped. The liquid came thick and dark and then translucent and then clear as it dissipated in layers. He didn't speak while he did it. When the carboy was empty he pushed breath out of his mouth

and the camera's mic picked it.

221 “They’re going to say you can’t prove anything. They’re going to say it doesn’t hit thresholds. You can’t make them act at a tenth of a threshold.” His voice came from off camera. “So I raised the baseline. They won’t miss this. I know what that means. I’m not asking for forgiveness for it. I’m telling you it’s on tape so they can’t say it didn’t happen.”

222 Emma’s shoulders drew in without moving her feet. Mitch’s jaw clicked once and held. He watched the wake change where the stream entered the reservoir. He watched it settle and spread across the face of the intake. He had worked with water enough to track the draw at the intake and how the surface settled over it.

223 Emma clicked back. Another clip took them to the tool bench upstairs. The angle was the same shelf but two feet to the left. Howard’s face was closer and more lined. He swallowed before he spoke.

224 “The skin changes run along vessels,” he said. “Light shifts pain. It eases. It spikes. That line between plant and animal, convenience.” He paused, swallowed. “If integration finishes, you stay. If it stops halfway, organs fail. They’ll push sedation on the ones who scare them. Don’t let them put anyone under who isn’t through it. If I’m wrong, bury me next to your mother and forget my mouth.” He exhaled; the next breath came shallow, then corrected. “If I’m right, you can still talk to me after. Different channel.”

225 He reached offscreen. A clay pot slid into the frame, dirt even with the rim. He pressed his right hand into the soil until the heel of the hand sat beneath the surface. He stayed there. He watched the point where skin and soil touched and lifted his palm a fraction. Thin white filaments hung, not many, but present. They tore when he lifted fully. He made a small sound with his throat that was half a laugh and half something that hit him harder than a joke. He blinked quick and did it again, pressing down, then lifting. The filaments followed. He swallowed and looked

toward the camera once, quick, then down again.

226 Emma set the remote on the table. She sagged back onto the metal stool near the tote. She set her hands on her knees and then slid her fingers along the edge of the stool to give them something fixed to hold. She did not wipe her eyes. Her face was bare and still.

227 Mitch stood. He took three steps toward the shelves and three back and did it again. The strap on his wrist held where he had put it. The ache along his palm matched the rate in his neck and then eased when he pressed the side of his hand to the upright of a shelf.

228 “Enough,” he said. He stepped to the TV and hit the power. The blue light went off. The small room held only the single bulb overhead. He kept his palm on the slab. Emma stayed still, shoulders tight, eyes on the blank screen. Cool from the concrete moved through his fingers until his head cleared.

229 “We move this.”

230 Emma nodded once. She stood and lifted the tote lid the rest of the way. She handed him the first two drives and then three notebooks bound with elastics. He took them in his left hand and set his right forearm under the weight so the strap held the bandage against it. They worked fast, stacking and wrapping the remainder in towels. They had the tote empty when the sound of tires rolled across the gravel strip by the kitchen door and into the room through the floor.

231 They froze. The sound idled, then died. A shadow moved across the curtained window upstairs. Emma tilted her head toward the switch. They doused the bulb and waited in the dark until the knock came, sharp and deliberate.

232 “Sheriff,” a voice called through the kitchen door.

233 Mitch took the steps up with the drives hugged to his ribs. Emma came behind him with the notebooks held tight and the remaining drive under one arm. He opened the kitchen door with his left hand while

keeping the load close.

234 Lynn Okafor stood in the back doorway square to the frame. Two deputies flanked and hung back by the porch steps. Her uniform was clean on her shoulders but it had been a day on it. At the edge of her jawline, pale gray edging ran along her jaw in a lichen patch. She had not tried to cover it.

235 “Evening,” she said. Her voice was low on purpose. She stepped inside and used her body to shift her deputies toward the front hall.

236 “What’s the knock?” Mitch asked.

237 “Raids start at dawn,” she said. “Relocations starting in the night under ‘care’ orders. Your names are on a list. I can hold it on my end for an hour. Maybe a little more if a call comes in and I don’t answer it right away.”

238 Emma’s shoulders squared. She set the notebooks on the table without sound.

239 “Why,” she said.

240 Okafor’s eyes were steady and tired. “Because I live here,” she said.

241 Her radio popped with a dispatcher’s voice. She reached up and turned the volume down until the mic lit but gave no sound. She looked at Mitch’s wrapped hand for a fraction and then chose not to speak on it. Mitch chose not to look at her jaw again. They held that for each other for the breath it took to make it real.

242 “You’ll take the alley behind the laundromat,” she said, pitching her words for their ears only, “follow the chain-link until it breaks near the old cannery lot. There’s a culvert that takes you under Fourth. Come up behind the substation. Don’t touch the fence. Keep between the posts and the drainage. West path goes up from there at the end of chain-link. Don’t cut across the field where the cameras sweep.”

243 Emma nodded.

244 “Don’t be here when the second sweep comes past,” Okafor said. She stepped backward to the door, brought the deputies with her in a practiced motion, and was gone with two footfalls and a quiet closing of the latch.

245 Mitch and Emma looked at each other and moved. No talk. Emma dumped a backpack on the table and opened it with one pull. Mitch fit the drives into soft places between rolled shirts and towels and zipped them. Emma slid notebooks into the pack’s flat back and pushed the smaller zip pocket closed with her thumb. He slung the straps over his shoulders, the strap across his chest settling over the leather band at his wrist.

246 They left by the back. The alley behind the fence ran a line of shadow they could keep without bending too far. A dog’s chain rattled once and then went quiet. A man’s cough sounded past the next yard. The hot smell of garbage rose where a lid had been lifted and left that way. They moved through it without leaving sound. At the laundromat’s rear wall, they hugged the concrete and counted beats between the sweep of headlights on the cross street.

247 A window lit on their right. A woman’s face framed by the glass looked out and did not flinch. Along her right cheek a ridge ran from jaw to ear, fine lines cut across it that did not break when she swallowed. She lifted her chin once. That was all. Emma gave her a short nod in return and moved on.

248 The chain-link ended where Okafor had said. The culvert sat low, half-crushed at one end, metal bent. Water threaded through it from a leak up the slope and pooled to nothing on the far side. They went through on elbows and knees and came up behind scrub. Mitch set his palm to the ground and the pull came in. The main under the lot to their left felt steady and close. He moved them two feet left, then ten yards west; the pull settled into a pressure map under his skin. He shifted them along its line and crossed where the asphalt had been eaten away in a rough trapezoid. He did it without a word. Emma followed and took her cues from his shoulder.

249 At the next block a white SUV idled around the corner. Its engine carried a low note that made the skin between Mitch's shoulder blades tighten. He raised a hand and set his palm down. They slipped behind a metal shed that held yard tools for the house next to the lot. His heel nudged a glass bottle; it tapped once. He trapped it with his boot before it could roll. From inside the house a dog huffed and shifted. Mitch pressed his palm to soil. The pull from the main steadied him. The engine's note dropped, eased past, then moved on. He tucked his right hand under the strap across his chest and used the pressure to hold the ache in one shape. He counted three breaths with his teeth clenched. Emma watched the drives' outline across the pack under his hand and kept her face still.

250 They crossed after the SUV's lights turned two streets down. Under a streetlamp, the pale skin at the edge of Emma's collar flushed green and then faded. She lifted her collar with two fingers to cover it without comment. He didn't look at her. He saw it anyway and moved his mouth into a thinner line. The west margin of town came with chain-link that stopped short for lack of budget or interest before the trees. A narrow dirt path climbed. It was dry, dust over hard soil and cedar duff. Fir needles under their boots snapped faintly. Pitch and sap rode the air, with a clean, wet smell under the dust, steady in shade where sun rarely reached.

251 Halfway up, the pull in Mitch's body tightened and went from general to mapped. The lines under the slope made sense in a way they had not half an hour ago. He held the angle and remembered the older cabin above the cemetery that had been used over years by families for mushroom season and shelter when storms got in too fast. Tyler Reed's grandmother had collected chanterelles with a coffee can from that ridge and used the cabin to dry boots. Somebody would have replaced the latch after last winter. If not, they had hands. He went where memory and the pull in his ankles lined up.

252 The cabin sat back ten yards from the path in a pocket cut out of brush by use. Mitch tried the door and felt the give under his palm. The

wood needed oil. He pushed in with his shoulder and they went into air that held old wood smoke and mouse. He lifted the crossbar from the floor and set it in the brackets. It sounded once, not loud, but solid, when it took the weight. Emma set her pack on the table and unlocked the zippers. She laid the notebooks out to breathe and checked the corners for damp. Mitch turned the light of his phone for one sweep around the room and then shut it off. The windows framed gaps in the trees; stripes of light and dark lay across town.

253 They heard trucks on the road along the cemetery. Mitch stepped to the window and set two fingers on the frame to orient himself. From the angle of the cabin he could get a line to their block between the trunks. The Caldwell house sat two doors down from the corner. Two white trucks pulled up and stopped with their lightbars dead. Four men got out. Two went in carrying duffels. One stood on the porch with a wand on a hose. The fourth knelt and scooped gel from a small bucket with a spreader and laid it across the boards in a continuous layer.

254 Emma came to the window next to him. She gripped the frame. Her knuckles went pale. She did not speak. She watched two of the men come back out. The one with the wand adjusted the angle of the nozzle and set it down against the porch post for a second while he reached back to fix the hose line. The kneeling man stood and walked to the siding near the steps and painted an orange X with deliberate strokes. The shape finished in three moves. The men checked the front lock and came down the steps.

255 Mitch's hand throbbed. He tightened the strap until the bandage pressed harder. The ache lined up with what sat on the porch and then took a notch down when his palm made contact with the lintel of the window. He held it there and kept his breath even.

256 In the trees below the cabin, a stag came through slow. Its right hind leg did not take full load. Its flank showed a patch where skin had scabbed into a scraped-healed bark pattern, dry and rough. It moved into shadow and out of it and then kept going. No noise. No comment. The

trucks idled below and then moved on to the next house.

257 Emma stepped back from the window. Mitch closed his fist around the Caldwell house key, felt the teeth, and pocketed it. Emma's hand steadied; she lifted the drives out of the pack and laid them side by side on the table. She took out a roll of tape and a pen and set to labeling pairs by date. Mitch took the old laptop from a shelf high enough to keep rodents off and hit the power. The fan spun up and settled. He connected the first drive and waited. The file tree populated with folders named the way his father had named projects his whole life: dates, three-letter codes, one or two plain words when no code would hold it.

258 Outside, a siren rose, fell, and faded. Then again, farther. Mitch checked the bar across the door and pressed it down so it sat deeper in the brackets. He came back to the table and said nothing. Emma had a notebook open to a fresh page and had written only the date in the corner.

259 He clicked open the first folder and watched the list fill.

260 They started with the clips where Howard talked straight at the camera about chemistry. It wasn't performance. He never sold his sentences. Results, then the thing they meant. The laptop hummed under Mitch's wrist and warmed his skin while a distant radio squawked and cut. Outside, an engine rose on the road and fell away.

261 "In trees," Howard said through the small speakers, "the cambium is a meristem. Wound response is growth response. They wanted fast closure over cuts. They got it. Then they ran it through our water and watched it hit us the same way. You can't filter a network out once it's set."

262 Mitch dragged the file into the folder and set the second destination. The bar advanced in silence. A faint chemical tang lifted up

the slope when the wind shifted. The gel on their porch sat in his throat. Emma checked the street once from the window and came back to add under the date: RES clip, intake, hand/soil.

263 “You okay,” he asked without looking up.

264 “Later.”

265 He let it stand and slotted the next drive. Folder names came up clean. Another siren swelled, fell, and faded.

266 “They marked the house,” he said. He didn’t add anything around it.

267 “We saw,” she said.

268 He copied the night reservoir clip to two targets, internal and stick.

269 “He poured it to trigger action,” Emma said. The pen stayed in her hand.

270 “He poured it so they couldn’t deny it,” Mitch said. He kept his hands moving.

271 The fan ran higher and held. Emma went to a shelf, brought back a first-aid tin, wrapped his wrist tighter, set the tape. The green at the edge of the wrap rose under the laptop’s screen light and receded when she covered it. The fan’s whine matched the throb under the wrap.

272 He opened the hand-in-soil clip, watched once, closed it, and set it to copy. The sound in that one stayed with him while he worked. When the chime came, he ejected the stick and passed it to Emma. She put it in a small plastic case with a cracked corner and put that case into the inside pocket of her jacket. She zipped it. She slid the second duplicate into a separate pocket and checked the zipper on that too.

273 Wind moved through the crowns on the ridge and stayed below the cabin roofline. The trucks didn’t come back to their block while they worked. The laptop’s fan ran and then idled between copies. They kept

the set tight and finished two sticks.

274 Emma uncapped her pen and ran a hard underline beneath the date.

275 Mitch set both hands flat on the table and bent his head. He counted the boards under his palms and the rings in them under the paint where his father would have seen them before anyone else did. The laptop's power light burned blue and small and steady.

Chapter 4

Growth Patterns

²⁷⁶ By morning, the paper went up in long strips that hissed as tape ran off the roll. Emma worked across the cabin wall, not caring about the knot holes or pitch smears in the wood behind it. She anchored the sheets with rough Xs of tape and used the side of a charcoal stick to lay in the ridge and where the creek dropped out of view under the cemetery road. She squared the corners of the town grid with a carpenter's pencil and held a folded county map under her elbow in a way that kept it close without deferring to it. The table under the window held her notebook, a mug of markers, and two vials from her kit labeled RES 7/2 and SW-plant tap 7/14. The labels faced up without her hands on them.

²⁷⁷ Mitch stood back with his palm on the window jamb to keep the pressure steady in that hand. The strap bit into the gauze under his wrist. It helped. The ache narrowed to a line. When Emma finished the main lines he stepped forward and touched the map with his left index finger.

²⁷⁸ "Here," he said.

²⁷⁹ Emma nodded and wrote CHERRY/THIRD: 28' in a small block letter that matched the rest. He pointed another block south and said "Return" and she wrote RETURN: 45' and drew a faint second line to show the depth change. The scale wasn't exact. It didn't have to be exact. It had to be useful.

²⁸⁰ They worked in a tight rhythm. Emma drew culverts where she had walked and where the county map left blanks, cutting little wedge marks into the curb lines. Mitch added pins where the draw in him had gone from general to precise. They used a length of orange twine from a drawer to connect his pins, and where the twine lay near a drawn line,

Emma traced it over with a darker mark. The window light had a smoke tint to it. Not thick. Just enough to lay a gray edge on paper.

281 "Clinic," Emma said, tapping the corner by the community center and writing evenly.

282 "School," Mitch said. He set the pin at the gym doors and pressed it in with his thumb.

283 "Plant," she said, and put a square east by the reservoir and shaded it.

284 He looked at the shaded square. The word plant had always meant work to him. Shift, whistle, fuel in a drip pan under a loader. The square meant something else now: pumps and hiss and chemicals he could smell without seeing. He rolled his shoulders back until they clicked and counted his breath through his nose. He didn't look at his hand. He didn't need to. The strap held his focus.

285 Emma stepped on a stool and extended the ridge farther west.

286 "Draw the line from the feeder to the fenced wing," he said.

287 "The slope forces it down here first," she said, and drew it. She didn't argue with him when the twine lined up with her guess. She traced over it and wrote "Gate: 12s from stop to open" with an arrow up the hill.

288 There was a knock that wasn't a knock, more pressure on the bar, a waiting. Mitch moved to the door and set his shoulder against the crossbar without lifting it.

289 "Who's there," he said.

290 "Tyler," a voice said. Young, careful.

291 Mitch raised the bar and opened the door half. Tyler Reed stood on the step in a dark hoodie, hairline showing small buds at the edges, out of season. His cheeks were wind-burned. His eyes had a long night on them. His hands were tucked under his sleeves.

292 "You found us," Mitch said.

293 Tyler angled his chin toward the town.

294 "You run your feet along the shade and the line of the old fence. Pretty loud up here last night. I guessed."

295 He stepped inside when Mitch moved back. He stopped in front of the paper and took it in, not speaking, not nodding. Emma didn't say welcome or anything like it. She climbed down one rung of the stool and passed him the charcoal. He didn't take it.

296 "Use the pencil," he said.

297 He went to the lower right corner of the map and set the tip down two blocks off a line Emma had drawn parallel to the creek.

298 "That ditch dries up here by mid-August," he said, and erased with the side of his hand and redrew a line into a culvert and out the other side half a block over.

299 "We saw damp in the culvert," Emma said.

300 "Leak from the plant's lawn irrigation. Not the same feed."

301 "Okay," she said. She wrote IRR LEAK next to a short tick.

302 Tyler stepped back. He looked at the pins.

303 "You pulled that from your hand," he said to Mitch. Not a question.

304 "Pulled it from the ground," Mitch said.

305 "Same thing now," Tyler said, quiet. He looked at the scarf around Emma's neck and the way she kept one edge up. He didn't stare. He kept his eyes at the level of her collarbone and then went back to the map.

306 Emma took a leaf from the sill. Alder. The stem still tracked water from where she had pinched it. She set the leaf's underside against the thin skin on her wrist where the green had risen the night before under the penlight. Her skin cooled in a way she hadn't braced for, a clean drop in sensation that cut through the dull burn she carried under the scarf.

She flinched and then held still. Her mouth parted without sound. The relief came in a round edge that didn't break her focus.

307 "That's real," Mitch said.

308 "Transpiration will pull moisture off the surface if the air stays dry," Emma said. Her voice was too even in the first syllables and then settled into her own voice.

309 Tyler watched but he didn't touch anything.

310 "My grandma used to put big maple leaves on her knees when she got sore after picking," he said.

311 Emma removed the leaf and set it down. The skin under it had a faint green that widened and faded at the edges. The air outside moved and the crowns beyond the window shook once and then again, not in gusts, in a single even sweep across different heights. The sound came in a single low pass and fell quiet. Helicopter rotors were not in it. Engines were not in it. Just air on needles and broadleaf surfaces.

312 "Clinic," Emma said again, tapping.

313 "They pull there and then up the hill. We saw that," Mitch said.

314 "School," Tyler said.

315 "What about the gym," Mitch said.

316 Tyler kept still.

317 "Don't go alone. Don't go straight. They set the outer doors on a badge after curfew. They bring 'em in off the side."

318 Emma drew a small rectangle where the side door would be and wrote BADGE in a block that fit.

319 "Plant first," she said.

320 Mitch nodded. The square east of town held his attention until his jaw set.

321 "We choke them where it starts," he said.

322 "Starts and spreads," Emma said.

323 She picked up a blue marker and drew clean lines from the plant along the mains to the taps and then added smaller arrows where runoff would carry it down alleys with bad gutters or yards with hoses that dripped.

324 "You're saying it tracks taps and runoff," Mitch said.

325 "And sampling dates match it," Emma said, glancing at the two vials on the table without reaching.

326 Mitch stepped up and ran the orange twine from the plant to the pin at Cherry and Third and then along to the return. He held the twine with rough fingers that still remembered felling knots without looking. The strap dug at his wrist and the ache in his palm settled into the background. The twine lay over the line. It was close enough. Close enough mattered.

327 "We take a look now," he said.

328 Tyler moved to the door.

329 "You want me to go count trucks up top while you're there," he said.

330 "You see something change, you text and then go quiet," Emma said.

331 Tyler nodded.

332 "Stay on the alder line. Keep your face down."

333 He'd swing past the gym's side door to clock the badge pattern, then head for the ridge.

334 He moved out and set the bar back on the brackets with careful hands.

335 Emma zipped her jacket and touched the inside pockets where the two sticks sat, one in a cracked case. She slung on the small pack with the

first-aid tin and the penlight. Mitch carried nothing extra. He looked once more at the square east and the lines they had drawn and then he turned away from the wall and the laptop on the shelf. The bar sounded once as it took its weight when he set it behind them. She ticked the plant's east fence where cedar roots lifted chain-link; they aimed for that seam.

336 The path down held shade for the first hundred yards and then let them out into lateral light and scrub that had gone brittle under heat. They crossed the cemetery road below the bend and cut along a fence line where blackberries ran a strip of thorns. A field mouse darted under the rail as they passed. Mitch kept his head level and his eyes moving along edges and corners. The draw in his body found the first main and then the next, a steady direction he could follow without looking. The reservoir's open water cooled the air down by the plant; it didn't change the heat on skin but it changed what the inside of his nose read.

337 The water plant fence ran chain-link topped with barbed wire. It sat clean where the gate road opened under the keypad camera. It bulged two spans down, roots from a cedar running under and lifting fence fabric, bending the bottom rail. The slab under the fence had cracked and kicked up at one edge from ground shift. Mitch set his hand down and felt the pressure shift.

338 "Under here," he said.

339 Emma slipped through the lifted gap first, flattening her chest and exhaling to reduce her frame, one arm forward, the pack tight to her ribs. Mitch eased the chain back with his shoulder so it didn't scrape. He went second. They stood inside the fence in a sliver of shade running along a concrete plinth and a steel pipe large enough to crawl through if a person had to. No camera had a direct angle on this spot. He'd already counted the arcs from the road above. He checked again anyway.

340 They moved in short lines between anchoring points: the shadow of a condenser, the blind side of a shed, the cover of a stack of sealed pallets tarped against sun. The raw-water headworks sat ahead, a trench with sheet-pile sides and a metal grating across the top. Bleach sat under something sweet and chemical. Below the grating, the bar screens cut the incoming flow into lanes that showed turbulence where water met steel. In those lanes, thin white filaments bridged and threaded and held in a pattern that wasn't random and wasn't tidy. They flexed and held under steady pressure; they didn't shear. Where two filaments met, they didn't knot. They lay along each other. Some slipped through and were gone under the next bar.

341 Emma crouched, keeping her weight on the balls of her feet to reduce print. She watched the way the filaments found the space between bars.

342 "Mesh size isn't stopping it," she said softly.

343 "Screens were built for branches and cans," Mitch said.

344 She pulled her phone and checked that the lens had no prints on it. She recorded ten seconds steady, then ten tracking across. She kept her body behind the bulkhead to avoid casting a shadow that could mark their position. The filaments yielded in a steady way. She watched the ends disappear under the next crossbar.

345 A white truck braked on gravel up the service lane. Doors shut. A dolly rattled. Two men in gray polo shirts with a green logo on the sleeve rolled canisters out of the bed. An electric pump sat on top of the dolly with clear hose coiled around it. Mitch smelled the carrier before he saw the labels. It sat back behind the bleach and the algae stink. Amine and ester and a solvent that took him years ago back to a time they'd sprayed roadsides in the county when the bids came thin and you said yes to hours wherever they came from. It stuck to the back of his tongue.

346 Emma set the phone low below the lip of the bulkhead and filmed labels. One placard carried the dead tree and fish symbol. Another

showed the NFPA diamond with a blue two and a yellow one. The brand name sat above smaller text that read "Vegetation Control Concentrate" with a long string of ingredients and a toll-free number listed under an address two states away. "Same euphemism as their wildfire-control lines, and it lines up with the bump in SW-plant tap seven-fourteen," she whispered.

³⁴⁷ The hose coupler clacked when the taller man tightened it onto a threaded port

Chapter 5

Corporate Containment

348 A badge plate blinked red, then green, as a woman in a green vest bumped the side door with her hip and rolled a bin toward the asphalt. Emma slipped through with her. Mitch followed, head down, collar up. The guard read a vest and a roll-away and kept his ear on the radio.

349 Inside, the noise changed. Fluorescents buzzed. Air carried disinfectant, sweat, and the bitter carrier from the plant that sat in Mitch's teeth. "Gym," Emma said under her breath. "We put Vance on record touching this before they lock it down."

350 "In and out, no heroics," Mitch said. He set his grip on the strap until the buckle bit and the ache in his hand held to a line he could use.

351 They took a short side corridor and came out into the gym.

352 Cots ran in lines across the varnished floor. IV poles stood at every third cot. Some had bags hung. Some didn't. Bleachers were pulled halfway out and filled with folding chairs. A vinyl banner ran above the scoreboard: COMMUNITY CARE in green and white. "Care" sat under a corporate mark. The signage and triage lanes came from disaster plans, turned to containment. Fans on stands pushed heat into corners. A child's voice rose and tipped over into quiet again. Someone coughed the dry cough that didn't end with a clear throat but just stopped with effort.

353 Mitch walked two steps behind Emma, body angled to block her from the nearest camera dome without drawing a line to her. He counted uniforms and belts and the positions of men with soft armor over corporate polos. One stood at the hall to the locker rooms with his feet apart and weight loaded forward. One sat at a table with an iPad, eyes up

more than down. Another kept moving without pattern, the way trained people did to make you misjudge distance.

354 Dianne Vance stood at center court. No microphone. No podium. She didn't need either. The suit fit with precise lines at the shoulders. Her boots sat the way boots sat when they hadn't been bought to pretend. Hair cut to angles. Her eyes held still.

355 "Some of you have noticed changes in your bodies or your loved ones," she said. "We are managing a seasonal flare-up. This is a temporary measure designed to reduce fear and ensure continuity."

356 Continuity. Mitch's molars met. Emma's jaw flexed. She lifted the phone just above chest height, camera aimed across her palm. She moved it slow. No fast pans, no wide swings. A steady record. A fine tremor started in her camera hand; she set her elbow to her ribs to steady it.

357 Vance's gaze slid the room in a grid. It touched them and didn't move on. Not a twitch. Just a hold. She spoke to the room while she kept them in view. Her index finger tapped the radio once on her lapel; the guard by the locker room shifted two steps on his circuit without breaking pace.

358 "We're prioritizing cases with respiratory strain and advanced dermal presentation," she said. "Family members will receive updates. Do not crowd staff. We will get to everyone."

359 A nurse in a second badge lifted a hand. "Priority cases this way," she called, and began to scan wrists, necks, the backs of hands. She didn't use a device. She used her eyes and the set of her mouth. Security shadowed her five steps behind.

360 A man with a denim jacket sat on the lowest bleacher row. The skin along his jaw carried brown parallel lines and didn't crack when he drank from a paper cup. An older woman next to him had a scarf tight to her throat. A boy two rows up held his mother's elbow, and the mother kept telling him they were fine. The boy's temples showed raised ridges, new and neat, hair fuzzed around the edges of the change.

361 “Sir,” a security man said to a person on a cot whose breathing hitched too high. “We’re going to take you to the back for a little while.”

362 “Where is ‘the back’,” the person on the next cot said. She sat up, chest heaving but eyes focused.

363 “Behind the bleachers,” the man said, flat and soft at the same time.

364 “We’re with him,” the woman said. She held the man’s hand.

365 “Please let go,” the security man said. He took her wrist with two fingers and separated their hands. Latex creaked. The man on the cot didn’t make a sound. His eyes went to the woman’s mouth and stayed there as if it could give him air.

366 The nurse had reached a man with bark edging at the collar. “Priority,” she told security. “Here.”

367 The man’s daughter put a palm on his shoulder. “No. He can sit.”

368 “Please, ma’am,” the nurse said without stopping. “We need to monitor him.”

369 Emma breathed in once through her nose and shifted to catch a clear line of Vance, the nurse, the separation, the sign on the wall. The phone gave a small vibration when it locked focus. Heat gathered at her neck under the scarf. Vance spoke about surge capacity and the importance of compliance.

370 “Corner dome’s your clock,” Mitch said without moving his mouth. He was close enough for her to catch it. “One minute before they rotate.”

371 He noted guards and routes with quiet precision. One egress at the main doors, blocked by a table with a stack of clipboards and hand sanitizer bottles. One at the locker rooms, controlled. One side service door near the equipment closet with a small badge reader and a crash bar, currently latched but not chained. A metal push-plate had been scuffed by shoes. A good sign.

372 He shifted his weight and felt his palm throb when the light above the bleachers threw a reflection through gauze. He set the strap with his thumb and pressed the bandage into bone to hold the pain to a steady track.

373 A woman across the cots cried out when two men lifted her husband by his elbows. “He needs me,” she said. One of the men nodded without answering and turned him so his feet pointed toward the bleachers. The woman stepped to follow. Another guard stepped in front of her and widened his stance. She looked up and then down and then away in a way that meant she knew what power looked like.

374 Vance walked by on a straight line that took her within arm’s length. She held out a trifold with green printing and a helpline number stamped at the top. “Take this,” she said. “It outlines what to expect in the next few hours.” The woman took the paper without looking at it. Her knuckles blanched on the edge. A crease ran down the center where her grip bent it. Her breath snagged and sat high. Emma lifted the phone and angled it so the banner sat above Vance’s shoulder and the trifold sat in the foreground for a second. She made sure the time stamp was visible at the edge of the frame. Then she turned the camera to herself. “Pi, Pineridge High School gym,” she said, voice low. “August 17, 17:14.” “Detention and separation under corporate supervision.” She flipped the camera to hold the banner and the corporate mark full frame, then back to show the loading behind the bleachers. The video kept going.

375 Vance pivoted and lifted two fingers off her side without looking at them. The moving security man changed his path and came toward their section of bleachers.

376 “Out,” Mitch said. He didn’t raise his voice.

377 Emma kept the phone steady and walked backward with him. The service door sat where it had to sit for a building like this. He leaned into the crash bar; the powered strike in the jamb buzzed, then released. The door opened into a cooler corridor with a strip of unwashed daylight

running at the far end. He let Emma through, cut a look down the hall, and let the door ease closed until the latch engaged without clack.

378 He heard rubber soles move on varnish behind him and then stop.

379 In the corridor, the exit door to the outside had scuffs halfway up from boots and gurney wheels. The badge plate by that door showed steady green when someone inside tried the handle; a maglock relay clicked in the jamb and a faint vibration ran through the metal. It went idle. He looked at Emma.

380 “Let’s go,” she said.

381 Heat hit them. Engines idled and then rose; radios squawked in chopped phrases. Two white trucks boxed the main drag at the intersection. Another sat halfway down, nose out at a precise angle. A drone swept a flat arc over the school’s front lot and held altitude over the flagpole. People stood in small clusters in the center median, eyes on the trucks and the drone, bodies held back from motion.

382 A black-and-white cruiser sat angled across the side street by the auto shop. Sheriff Lynn Okafor’s arm rested along the top of the steering wheel. The radio on her shoulder blinked a small steady light. Her jawline showed a pale edge that caught sun and shade and then hid again. She looked toward the gym door and then away. Her cruiser eased a foot, opening a narrow gap between her front bumper and a brown sedan.

383 Mitch took Emma’s elbow and went into the lane. They hit sun as they passed the front of the school and then shadow as the maples over the sidewalk cast patterned shade that wasn’t enough to hide them from a careful eye but was enough to give their skin a break from the heat. The heat at Emma’s neck eased.

384 Vance stepped out into the school's front portico with a radio handset at her jaw. She didn't raise her voice. She didn't have to. She pointed back toward the service corridor they had just used. The security man who had paused at the gym door took that as a vector and went.

385 "Go," Mitch said.

386 They ran. Not flat out, the kind of run that could stop without a stumble and change direction. Across the lot. Past the no-parking signs chalked with tire scuffs from months of not enforcing anything but obedience. Into the slot between the band room and the lunchroom that always smelled of sour milk and dust. A narrow alley kept its cool where the building mass shaded it all day. The far end opened to a three-foot wall someone had poured quick and dirty with aggregate that showed at the edges.

387 Emma planted a hand, swung her hips, and got a foot up. The phone bobbed as she caught the top. It jumped from her palm. Mitch scooped it from below with his left hand before it hit. The plastic edge bit his palm; the weight slapped into his hand. Their eyes met for a beat, then they moved. He shoved the phone back to her and pushed her over the wall with the other hand. She landed on the balls of her feet and turned to take his wrist as he came over.

388 "Thank you," she said, breath short.

389 He didn't answer. He dropped to a crouch on the other side and took a quick look. No one in the small delivery yard. No eyes in the windows they could see. They ran along a line the width of a pickup between the back of the cafeteria and a chain-link fence with blackberry woven through and dry leaves rattling in it.

390 The drone's note dipped, adjusted, then came lower over the roofline. The sound raised the hairs at the back of Mitch's neck. He pulled Emma into the narrow shade of a laundry line that ran from a set of screw eyes to a bent T-post in a back yard. Sheets hung, clean and heavy. A pair of jeans shifted on a clip. The drone slid over at a steady speed and did

not hover. Sun through cloth laid moving shapes on the ground that broke their outline. Mitch kept his shoulders inside those shapes until the note lifted.

391 They cut through that yard. A dog huffed once inside the house and went quiet. The chain-link fence at the back leaned under the weight of a grape vine. Mitch put a foot on the diamond and pushed down. The metal caught the edge of his boot and stuttered. The top coil snagged his sleeve and ripped it. He went over as the mesh tore, landed with weight even on his knees, and then put his bandaged hand down without thinking. The splinter ground against a tendon; a hard jolt ran along the bone. He bit it back, swallowed, and pushed to standing before the shake could show. Blood wet the gauze and then slowed under pressure when he locked the strap into the next hole.

392 “Hold on,” he said to Emma while he turned the buckle under to kill any glint.

393 “Ty!” Emma said without raising her voice. It wasn’t a call. It was a warning sound to anyone who knew it.

394 A single whistle sounded from a shadow at the far corner where a hedge cut into a fence line. Tyler Reed stepped out from under a cedar branch. Hoodie up. Eyes up. He lifted two fingers and made a quick sketch in the air that meant come now and low. They moved. He didn’t look back to see if they were coming. He knew they were.

395 “Patrols pushed east. This seam’s blind,” he said as they reached him, voice clipped and low. “Figured you’d take it.”

396 He led them along the back side of a garage and into the thin wild that towns leave behind the places they pretend to trim. Cedar, alder, vine maple, tall dry grass that broke under a step without sound if you knew where to put your feet. The corridor ran behind three houses and then opened out into a strip that followed a ditch the county forgot when budgets cut crews in half. Air dropped cooler under the first cedar crowns. Siren edges fell back and leaf hiss took over. Cedar duff and salal

gave a damp, clean smell.

397 Behind them, an amplified voice said, “Curfew remains in effect tonight. Please return to your homes and await further instruction.” It came thin over the tops of roofs and trees, the volume turned down by distance and branch.

398 Okafor’s cruiser honked twice, a clipped code. Mitch didn’t know the code but he knew what it wasn’t. It wasn’t a stop signal.

399 They kept moving.

400 The strip of trees behind the houses thickened into a stand you could feel in your feet. The ground there held water longer and let roots run closer to the surface. Mitch tracked the lines under the path in the bottom of his ribs. He breathed in and knew where the main ran and where the return cut under the road, even from here, even with the drone still moving its pattern somewhere to the east.

401 Tyler kept his body low without hunching his shoulders. He carried the line of a kid who had learned how to walk in a place that didn’t want him seen. When he stopped, he stopped without showing effort. He set one palm to a cedar trunk as if it were a post and not anything else. He glanced back.

402 “You two good?” he asked.

403 Emma nodded. Sweat had dampened the hair near her temple and darkened the edge of her scarf. The green at the side of her throat had stayed masked. She didn’t reach for it.

404 “Tracked the injection crews at the plant,” Mitch said. “They’re coupling in concentrate labeled ‘vegetation control’ at the headworks. Emma got it.”

405 Tyler's mouth tightened. "I felt it," he said. "Air got wrong right after lunch."

406 Emma thumbed to wake her phone and scrubbed back to the footage of the grating and the canister labels. She held it so Tyler could see without it catching sun.

407 "Good," Tyler said. "Bad, but good you got it." He looked up through branches and then back down. "It's not gonna be enough to show it. You know that."

408 "Proof stacks," Emma said. "We keep going."

409 Tyler took a breath through his nose and let it out slow. "There's a place," he said, keeping his voice even. "Where people aren't gone. Not the way they say. You wanna see it, we go west."

410 Emma held still. Mitch watched her from the side without turning his head. She didn't step back. She didn't step forward. She kept even between motion and stillness the way she did when she was testing a solution.

411 "We go west," Mitch said. He said it and left it there.

412 "Not right now," Tyler said. "Now we keep edges. Stay under. Then we go." He pointed with his chin toward the slope. "You can hear it already."

413 Mitch didn't answer. He lifted his bandaged palm an inch and held it in air. The pull ran through his arm and into his shoulder. "Cherry and Third is twenty-eight feet to the main," he said, not because it mattered here but because it grounded him to say it out loud. "Return forty-five a block south."

414 Tyler's eyebrows moved a fraction. "Listening," he said. "You got it on without anyone teaching you because it wanted on."

415 "Teach him how to keep it from burning him up," Emma said. "He can use it. It's using him."

416 Tyler nodded. “We can do that. In four, hold two, out six. Repeat.” He looked at Mitch. “Hard part is you gotta breathe slow when everything says run.”

417 “Yeah,” Mitch said. He kept it wary and practical.

418 Emma scrolled through the video until a frame showed Vance’s face with the banner in the background and a guard peeling a woman’s fingers off a hand. She froze the frame for a second and then unfroze it and let the clip run again. “You take a copy,” she said to Tyler. “If we get grabbed, someone still has it.”

419 “Phone’s fine but they scan phones,” Tyler said. “Drives don’t ping.”

420 Emma pulled a tiny OTG adapter from the inside pocket of her jacket and a small gray stick from the other. “I carry two spares,” she said. “This one’s blank.” She plugged the adapter in and the stick after it and opened the share drawer. The phone vibrated once and then began to push the file across. “Thirty seconds.”

421 “Thirty,” Tyler repeated. He watched the path upslope without moving. “They’re burning something two streets east. I can smell it.”

422 The drone’s tone thinned and moved away. A breeze went through the crowns and covered their low voices. Brush and slope cut sightlines from the street above.

423 Mitch turned his head enough to get a line through the branches. Through a gap between trunks and roofs he saw a roof edge with a line of flame working along the eave. Not a full burn. A line. A crew would be standing off with a wand and a gel that took fire in a controlled way. Smoke made the sky brown along a strip. He pictured the orange X he had watched get painted on the Caldwell house and kept his face still.

424 The transfer bar filled. Emma ejected the stick and capped it. She put the OTG adapter in her pocket and handed the drive to Tyler.

425 “You keep moving after we split,” she said. “If you get stopped, you eat it.”

426 Tyler cracked a smile that didn’t run to humor. “It’s small,” he said. He slid the drive into a slit he’d cut in the hem of his hoodie and pressed the tape down over it from the inside. “You’re not the first one to say that.”

427 Mitch tasted that bitter carrier on air again even this far from the plant. He rolled his shoulders and set his wrist against his ribs to keep the strap in place.

428 “What about the water plant,” he said. “We hit that next.”

429 Emma nodded. “We have the injection point and the port coupling on video. We need to get in and stop flow. There’s a window on second shift, camera gap.” She didn’t say the day. She didn’t have to say it. The way she said “window” closed that choice down to a narrow piece of time.

430 “Tyler,” Mitch said. “Can you get eyes on truck count up the hill while we move west. Or did you already?”

431 “Already did,” Tyler said. “They’re moving more vans than yesterday. Fewer pickups. I think they’re consolidating. Gate timing is still twelve from stop to open. Same keypad. Drone sweep didn’t change.”

432 “Good,” Emma said. She pushed the back of her hand under her scarf to wipe sweat and then looked at the skin without exposing it. Her throat stayed covered. The movement said enough.

433 A helicopter came in low from the north, blades thumping. The crowns above them leaned west under the wash and then came back. Needles hissed when air moved across them. The sound came and went.

434 “Let’s go,” Tyler said. He stepped off the deer trace and onto a line that cut between two nurse logs and a sprawl of ocean spray that stayed green all summer no matter what the county said was drought. Sword fern stacked low where light reached. “We stay under and out of sight

until we clear the houses. There's a place you can set those drives that's safer than your jacket. Then we go talk to someone who isn't gone." He looked at Emma when he said the last part and then looked away. He wasn't telling a story. He was offering a route.

435 They went west. The town's edge ran out behind them. A PA carried one more time: "Curfew is in effect. Return home by nineteen hundred." The hour put a number on a threat. It did not change their path. Ground underfoot turned from cut grass and rock to duff that gave without crumbling. Air lost a degree and a half and picked up damp.

436 Mitch kept his ears on the drone and the helo and the trucks, and he kept the rest of him on the pull that told him where water lay in the ground and what direction lines ran that people had forgotten were there until they needed them. He chewed one cedar needle to keep spit in his mouth and the taste cut through the carrier and the smoke.

437 At a bend where the path met a shelf of sandstone, Tyler lifted his hand and they stopped. He listened in a way that made his shoulders unlock instead of coil. He counted a breath in to four and out to six. Mitch matched him without trying to. The pull toward the main dulled a fraction. The pain in his palm took a notch down. He didn't name it relief. He named it a change he could use.

438 "We go quiet for a bit," Tyler said. "We'll pass under a spot that looks out from someone's kitchen. They like to watch the trees. Don't want to give them a show."

439 They went quiet. A scrub jay called once, then went quiet. The hillside beyond the trees held the glare and the noise they had just moved through, but it didn't step into the corridor with them.

440 The path turned again and they were beneath cedar in steady shade. Mitch reached out and touched a trunk with his right hand without thinking about comfort. The bark was dry on the surface and cool underneath, the cool coming through the gauze. Resin scent was faint in the heat. The pain in his bandaged palm steadied with that contact in the

way it had when he pressed it to the Douglas-fir porch post at home before there had been an X painted on the siding. He didn't lean into it. He just took the data point.

441 "Teach me the rest of the listening," he said to Tyler, voice low.

442 "We start with not fighting what you already hear," Tyler said. "You don't force it to stop. You tell it where to sit."

443 Emma's phone made a brief chirp and then her thumb killed the sound. She pulled it back open and checked the file, scrolled through the last seconds to confirm that in the rush and the wall and the fence the recording had not corrupted. It hadn't. She set it to airplane mode and slid it back into her interior pocket, pressed close to one of the sticks with Howard's files. She patted the other pocket where the second stick sat. She touched both zippers without looking down.

444 They moved again, every step taking them farther from the gym's fluorescent ceiling and from a voice in a suit that never raised and never had to. Every step took them toward the west and whatever Tyler meant to show.

445 "Plant next," Mitch said once more, more to own it than to convince anyone. Emma nodded. Tyler didn't argue. He set the pace for a body with a torn sleeve and a hand that needed pressure and for a second body that carried two drives and the habit of putting proof before sleep. The day dropped toward evening in small increments you couldn't time with a watch, only with air and the way the calls changed.

446 They reached a line of old fence posts, half-rotted at the base and held up more by the roots that had grown around them than by any wood left inside. Tyler put a hand on the top of one and stepped over. Mitch followed and felt the pull of water deeper now, slower under all of it. Not the mains. A deeper body of water, slow and broad.

447 "West," Tyler said again, and they went, curfew orders rolling behind them through empty streets.

Chapter 6

Indigenous Knowledge

448 They moved under cedar until the heat fell away. Tyler cut into a dip where moss held moisture and roots braided out of the slope where soil had packed tight around them. Air cooled and smelled of wet duff that had sat unbothered, a clean, grounded smell that did not reach the street. Mitch tracked the change in his ribs before it reached his skin. Emma stepped into the hollow and stopped with her hands still, taking the temperature with the back of one knuckle, the motion exact from the lab and pretending it was only that.

449 Tyler pointed to the floor of the hollow with two fingers. “Here,” he said. He talked low. “No one looks down from the road and sees this. Sound sits different. You can breathe for real.”

450 They crouched. The ground was steady under them. Mitch flexed his right hand and loosened the strap for a second to let blood run, then he cinched it back. He had turned the buckle under earlier and kept it turned. The gauze under the leather had gone stiff at one edge where he came over the fence. It pulled when he moved. He set the hand on a root and let the cool come into it without moving his shoulder.

451 “Show me,” he said.

452 Tyler knelt at a cedar that had lifted a fan of roots when the soil washed a little years back. He set his palm to the root, not pressing hard. “In four,” he said. He breathed. “Hold two.” His ribs stayed wide. “Out six. Twice. Then you tell your hand to sit. You don’t tell it to stop. You set it down and give it a job.” He counted again, the numbers very quiet. He looked at Mitch. “Put your hand on the wood. Turn your head and find a spot that doesn’t flash.”

453 Mitch set his palm on the next root. The outer layer was rough and dry. Underneath it was cool. He matched Tyler's breath. He reached toward the basin without meaning to. The pull surged. His knees softened and the edge of his sight tightened. Tyler set his own palm to the wood and showed the recovery cadence with his ribs. "In six. Hold one. Out eight," he said, quick and low. Mitch followed. By the third out-breath, the ground steadied under him. The pull that had been running through him calmed from a swing to a single direction he could name. It sat in his shoulder, then set into the root under his hand, fitting a groove. He felt the first main down-slope and the slower basin west of it, a heavy body of water that did not move fast. He had sensed both all day and the sense had kicked at him every time they hit open ground. Now it ran even. He did not sway toward it. He held his breath on the fourth count without counting out loud and let it go long. He could have stayed in that for a while if the day allowed it.

454 Emma watched their hands and then copied the breath. She did not lay her palm to the root at first. She pressed her open hand to the scarf at her throat and kept pressure. Breath in. Hold. Out. The green at her neck stayed under cloth. Heat had climbed under the scarf when they crossed the lots. Now the skin cooled under her palm in a way that was not only sweat. Her breath caught once.

455 "Better to let it ride all the way out," Tyler said. He kept his voice the same. "You try to clamp it and it spikes somewhere else."

456 Emma nodded. She did it again and did not cut it. Her shoulders set down half an inch.

457 "You both need to hear this," Tyler said. "If you try to force it, it hurts. You try to kill what's growing and it answers with pain that runs the line. That's true for you and for the ground. You can guide it. You can tell it where to be." He picked up a small stick and moved it across the root. "It listens faster when you make sense. Breath is what makes sense."

458 Wind went through at the rim of the hollow. Here the crowns moved and then were still. No drone note. No radio. No funneled engine idle. Mitch's jaw unlocked and then tightened when it remembered the Caldwell porch and the X. He took another breath and set it with the count.

459 He felt them before he knew what he was naming. Distinct patches in the ground that held a warmer tone and a shape he knew as human without seeing a shape. Not shadows. Not heat through air. A field that his body caught, sent in through palm bone and ribs and the places where skin was already not just skin anymore. He tightened the strap and kept his mouth still for a second. Then he said, "Four." He kept his eyes on the moss when he said it. Then, after a beat, "No. Five."

460 Tyler made a small move with his eyebrows. "Yeah," he said. "They're here. Not close. Not underfoot. But here."

461 Emma looked at him and did not say anything. She put her palm on the root now, very light, and set her breath to match. The ache around her collar lessened again. The green at the edge of cloth shifted and dimmed without disappearing.

462 A pop ran along the slope from west to east. Not a gun. Wood under stress. A second later the ground under their knees signaled a crack and then a hollow sound that carried under their palms. A tree had gone. It wasn't a clean felling. It sounded uneven at the end, a weight that had not wanted that angle. The vibration came through the roots and out through their bones. A low pressure passed along the wood under their hands, one shared beat, then quiet.

463 "Someone put a cut where it shouldn't go," Mitch said. The taste of amine was still there under his tongue from earlier. He spat grit away without moving his head. He did not stand. He kept his palm where it was and felt the basin again. He could draw a map on the root with his finger and be right.

464 They practiced for a while. There was no clock in the hollow. Day moved, light moved, but the air stayed even. Mitch took his hand off the root and put it back and timed how long it took for the pull to settle. He walked the sensation from palm to forearm and back down into the wood. He named distances without saying the numbers out loud, just to see if he could, and then spoke them to Emma when she asked. He did not sway now. He still wanted to lean but he did not do it.

465 Emma changed where she put her fingers and where she set her palm on her throat until the flare under her scarf eased faster and didn't spike at the next breath. She did not take the scarf off. The back of her hand touched the edge where green had shown before and she watched it with professional attention without retreating into chart voice.

466 "This is not going to stop," Tyler said. He was not warning them to run. He was saying the truth out loud with no sugar. "You guide it and you live in it. You make it a channel. If you try to cut the channel, it will find you another way."

467 Mitch's jaw worked. He knew a river that had done that to a road they had been paid to keep open. He did not say it. He breathed and kept count with Tyler until the numbers were not numbers anymore but a shape in his head he could move through without voice.

468 "Tomorrow," Tyler said. He wiped dirt off his palm onto his jeans. He scanned the rim the way he always did, not with fear but with practice. "We go see who stayed."

469 Emma pulled the scarf a fraction higher and nodded. "We go," she said. Her voice stayed low. She looked at Mitch once to make sure he was still with them. He met her eyes and didn't look away.

470 They stayed in the hollow as the light went dull and the sound of town drifted in and out of range. The curfew PA came thin over the houses and didn't carry here. A single truck worked a street two ridges over with a pattern that stopped and started. No one put a light on them. They ate cold food and drank water from the bottle Emma kept buried in

her pack with the sticks. Mitch didn't take his boots off. Emma wrote two lines in a small notebook and put it away. Tyler slept and then woke up, which he had trained himself to do in short pieces. Mitch did not sleep. He let his palm rest against the root until the ache held in the root more than it held in him.

471 They left at first light for the west. Heat had not climbed back. The ground underfoot gave a little in a way that said it remembered rain even after a month of no rain. Birds made a sound that was not city birds. Underfoot, salal pressed at their shins; sword fern edged the shade. The preserve stood in front of them with trunks too big to make sense of until you stood beside them and touched the bark with a flat hand. They did not speak for the last stretch. Tyler marked a line with his palm down and they slid into it, taking a side aisle without drawing eyes.

472 The ring sat in a shallow bowl where roots of the oldest trees pushed to the surface and held an inside edge. The first body came into view between two swellings of trunk. Emma stopped moving without stepping back. Mitch did the same at exactly the same moment.

473 Human shoulders and a neck had not vanished. They had changed into something that belonged here. Patches of bark on skin had fused to real bark. There was a seam at the collar and then no seam. Rib shape was visible where cambium had thickened over it. A hand lay open and had become part of a root flare. Fingers had curled and sunk in and now made a grip that would hold for seasons. The face carried features. Eyes were closed. There was no rot. The surface at the cheek had the same matte as the tree. Where hair had been, needles caught leaf bits and dust. Where a mouth had been was a curve that did not open. The whole of it was not dead. The whole of it was not an object. It existed as part of the tree that had taken it in and held it.

474 Tyler kept his hood down. “Don’t touch first,” he said. “Don’t touch at all unless they guide you.” He nodded toward the ring. “They know we’re here.”

475 Leaves above them tremored. It passed around the circle with a coherence that made sense and stopped at the far side and then settled. Emma took breath in and counted without counting out loud. The pulse in her throat went slower. She stepped to a root, stopped short of it, and lowered herself to kneel. She put her hand on the ground near the flare where hair-thin roots ran at the surface. Not yet on the root. Not yet on anyone. The soil was cool and damp. She let her palm settle. She felt her own heartbeat as a tap in her hand. Another rhythm came up to meet it. It did not match at first. It moved, searching, then found the count and set with it. She adjusted her breath to in four, out six. The second rhythm altered in step.

476 Mitch looked left and then right, eye level at the ring. He saw a face he knew. The man had sat at the front of a civics class in sophomore year with sleeves rolled to the elbow and a voice that had cut through chatter without effort. The name got there with a small calm in Mitch’s head. Hanley. He had thrown chalk once at a kid who chewed hard candy at the back. He had driven a blue truck with a dented tailgate and never fixed it. Mitch’s throat tightened and his jaw set. Chalk dust in the air and the short end-of-period bell came back, brief and exact.

477 “Mr. Hanley,” Mitch said, steady and low. He stayed where he was, hands down. “Sir.”

478 Eyelids lifted. Not all the way. Enough. A branch above moved up a fraction and held and then rested. Needles at the end of it spread, then closed. Mitch swallowed and kept his mouth shut. He nodded once. Nothing in him got bigger or smaller at the wrong speed. He stood there. He breathed.

479 Tyler started at one end and said names, first names and family names. He said them in a voice that touched the space without cutting it.

After each name, a pattern answered. One cluster of leaves twitched, another lifted and rested. A third changed angle enough that Emma could have plotted the angle. It wasn't wind. Wind hit even. This moved in ones and twos and lines that matched the names.

480 "Angela Wash," Tyler said. A small limb shifted above a slender torso that had sunk farther than some of the others. "Mr. Beltran." A heavier branch at the far side dipped and rose a fraction of an inch. "Lila." The smallest trunk in the circle lifted a tuft of needles on a twig and held it there.

481 Mitch made himself say it. "Do you, " He stopped. There was no better word. "Do you hurt?"

482 It felt wrong to speak into the ring like that. He didn't have any other way.

483 Sound in the canopy cut down to near nothing. No jay. No insect buzz. Even his breath felt thinner. It lasted one beat of Emma's count and then the sound came back in. Emma did not break contact. She touched her scarf. She said, "Yes. And more."

484 She had not heard a word. She had felt a body's wave. She put a name to the sensation because it was the only one that matched. The answer was not only pain, but pain sat inside it and radiated and traveled. It did not erase joy or memory. It did not override heat on bark, sunlight on all the combined surfaces, water moving up through all of them in shapes that had not belonged to human tissue and now did. It was a lot. It did not crush her. It didn't ask for forgiveness. It was just true.

485 She would have pulled her hand away if another sound had not come to her. It came different. Under her palm, a hair-thin root moved and gave two light taps in time with her out-breath. A child's voice arrived without crossing air. High and soft and steady. Hello. She jerked her hand a fraction and then left it where it was. The voice came again, the same two syllables, calm and close. Hello. She did not answer with words. She did not know how to answer through wood. She smiled because she

couldn't not. Moisture ran in her eyes and she did not disgust herself for it the way she would have last week. She let it be there and then it cleared. She lifted her free hand six inches and set it back down.

486 Tyler's eyes went to her and he did not speak. He had seen that before. He let her be inside it. He did not interrupt to explain it.

487 Emma drew her palm back. The second pulse stayed for a beat and then sank. She did not reach to grab it again. She held the air with her hand open for a second and then rested it on her knee. She looked at Mitch. He looked back. His face had moved. Fear set back. His jaw settled and stayed.

488 "We will carry this," Emma said. She spoke to the ring and didn't speak to anything else. "We will show what they are doing. We'll put plant intake and flow and the badge logs at the gym and clinic on every screen that can still light."

489 Leaves in three places moved at the same time and stilled at the same time, and it did not match wind. It was not show. It was an answer that did not need their words for it, and she knew that too.

490 Mitch took his cap off and put it back on. He nodded at Mr. Hanley and didn't pretend it was a goodbye. "We'll be back," he said. He wasn't making a promise he couldn't keep. He was setting a plan he intended to meet.

491 They stepped out of the ring with their bodies as steady as they could keep them. Emma wiped her palm on her jeans and her fingers shook once and then were still. Tyler walked backward two steps without turning his back and then turned and took them down a line that would keep them from an open look. They did not talk until they were away from the bowl and its edge.

492 Steps fell into the same count. In four, out six. Needles ticked at the rim and fell quiet again. The echo from Emma's contact ran once through her palm and faded by the third breath.

493 “He said hello,” Emma said then. She did not stop moving when she said it. She didn’t need to say who.

494 “I know,” Tyler said. “They do that.”

495 “What about pain,” Mitch said. He didn’t ask the question again for an answer. He asked it to keep it in the air where it didn’t get forgotten.

496 “Pain stays,” Tyler said. “It doesn’t hit only one. It spreads. It’s not smaller. It’s different. When the company burns a roof with gel, they feel that. When you put your hand on the root and breathe right, they feel that too.”

497 They walked to the hollow in a set of steps that had a rhythm now. The way they carried their shoulders had shifted. Emma kept her scarf square and used her hand to adjust it without exposing anything. Mitch put his hand on this tree and that one without pausing long, just enough to keep the ache in a shape he owned.

498 What they had learned at the ring fixed the order: they were aware; the plant set the flow that reached them, and the checkpoint and the school moved bodies into and out of reach. Back in the hollow, air still held cool. They picked their spots without talking about who sat where. Emma took a knee and opened her notebook and drew a line that stood in for the checkpoint where two white trucks formed a block at the main drag. She drew a second for the school gym and a third for the plant where the headworks sat. She printed the words in a neat, tight hand. “Checkpoint, school, plant,” she said. “Three points. We cut any one, it buys time. We cut two, they change their posture. We cut the plant at the right minute, we change flow.”

499 “The plant,” Mitch said. He leaned forward and set his finger on the dirt. He drew a rectangle and put a gap where the cedar had lifted the

fence. He put a line where the slab had cracked. He marked the headworks and the grating lane and the parking loop for the trucks. He marked the port where the crew had coupled the clear hose to the threaded fitting. He didn't label any of it in words. He had it in his head and that was enough. "Second shift gap," he said.

500 Emma nodded. "Second shift," she said. "Cameras have a dead zone at changeover. Gate: twelve seconds from stop to open. Same as Tyler said." She looked at his strap and then at his face. "I need to be in position. You need to not bleed." She knew he knew that.

501 He braced the heel of his hand on the root a second without thinking and then moved it away. "I'll be fine," he said. He didn't snap it. He just gave her the answer he had and nothing more.

502 Tyler watched their map in dirt. "Checkpoint is loud and bad optics for them if you hit it right," he said. "But they'll pile in fast. If you make a move there, you need a hole before the drone completes a half arc. The drone pauses one second longer over the flagpole than anywhere else. People stand under it when it stops. They think it's watching the flag. It's watching them."

503 "We don't make moves at the checkpoint first," Emma said. "We document it from two angles and draw them east. The school, "

504 "School first," Mitch said. "We pull kids out."

505 "The plant first at changeover," Emma said. "That's the window that shifts flow and buys everything else. Then we go to the school."

506 Mitch held her look, then gave a short nod. "Plant first. Tonight at dusk."

507 From the ridge, a small radio squawk cut once and quit. They stilled. Three breaths on the count, quiet and even, then they went back to the map.

508 "Recovery when it spikes," Tyler said. He set his hand on the cedar root and showed the cadence with his ribs before the words came.

“When you get the pull too strong, you do in six, hold one, out eight. You switch the count. Rest your palm on wood or on ground where you can see tiny roots. Not wet. Not bare rock. Not metal. If you ride it out for three cycles, you can keep moving without your legs going out.” He looked at Mitch and then at Emma. “You practice that now so your body can find it fast.”

509 They did. Mitch changed the breath and it felt wrong for the first cycle and then it set. Emma sat and breathed with them and it looked like nothing had changed to anyone who didn’t watch her throat. The green under the cloth stayed under. Her skin cooled and stayed cool while she kept the count.

510 Mitch got up and took a stick and scratched lines in dirt. He put the culvert under Fourth where they had pulled themselves through on their elbows. He put the break in the chain-link near the cannery lot. He put the substation fence with the live hum that had made the hair on his forearm lift when they skirted it. He put a small square for the clinic door with the beige scanner on a stand. He drew a curve around the field where cameras swept and marked it with a notch.

511 Emma leaned forward and drew two diagonal lines across his marks where the mains crossed those points. “Feed,” she said. “Return.” She did not write numbers. She made the angles and distance and then looked at Mitch. He nodded. She felt the basin under their knees and drew it too, a shallow arc with weight at the edges.

512 “I try to push what we see out when I can,” Emma said. “Not live. Bursts. When a line is off. When I can sit on a connection that isn’t going to ping. It buys us less than broadcasting, but it buys us enough to make the next move. If I’m filming, you need to handle bodies. I can’t hold both.”

513 Mitch looked at her. She didn’t have to say that out loud for him to know. He inclined his head, not a nod, just a small tilt that meant yes. “I’ll pull doors,” he said. “I’ll take the first hit. You get the shots. You don’t

stop for me.”

514 Tyler’s jaw tightened. “Don’t sprint into the hole,” he said. “Don’t do what makes sense to your blood and puts me with no cover. I’m not saying don’t be brave. I’m saying don’t be dumb.”

515 Mitch smiled without humor. “I’ll keep you behind me,” he said. “You stay on my back. I take the first hit.” He said it plain. It wasn’t a promise. It was a line in him that had held even when he had been useless at everything else.

516 Something moved above the hollow. Wings. Not a single bird. Not a casual scatter. A flock rose from a stand to the south in a tight ring and held a shape that did not fall apart quick. They circled once, not fast, then drifted west keeping the ring. The sound was steady. They all looked up. Emma watched them until they went beyond the far trees and sunk from sight.

517 “Sign, not instruction,” Tyler said. He looked down again and put his hand back on the cedar root.

518 They made a small cache under the root on the north side of the hollow. Tyler showed them where the cavity kept dry and did not flood even when the creek rose after a storm. They wrapped two water bottles in a shirt and slid them in. Emma put the little first-aid tin there. Mitch added jerky and a roll of tape. They covered it with bark and needles and checked that air could still move in the pocket so mold wouldn’t take it in two days.

519 “Tonight at dusk,” Emma said. “We move tonight at dusk.”

520 “Tonight at dusk,” Tyler echoed. He studied the sky through the needle patterns and used them to set an hour in his head. “You have time to rest a little.” He looked at Emma and then at the spot where the sun laid a strip across the ground. “You can take a little light.”

521 “I don’t need,” Emma started, then cut it. She did not lie to him. “Ten minutes.”

522 She sat where the sun reached past the edge of the hollow. The strip of light hit the scarf and the edge of her jaw. She did not pull it off. She set the back of her hand where cloth met skin and held it still. The skin under her hand warmed and then something else happened. The green under her skin intensified and spread in a shallow plane under the scarf. It started at the collar and moved into the angle of her jaw and up toward her ear in a thin, even band. It was not bright. It was not a trick of light in the woods. It was real. She kept her eyes closed and breathed in the count. The ache at the base of her skull that had been with her since morning eased. Her shoulders let go more than they had all day.

523 Mitch looked over and then looked back away like he had seen something he wasn't supposed to see. He looked again because he had to. The green was stronger than he had ever seen it. It wasn't a reflection. It wasn't a bruise. He had the urge to pull her back into shade. He held still instead. "Emma," he said.

524 "It's okay," she said. She did not open her eyes. "I'm being careful."

525 He watched her hand where it rested and the line of light under cloth. He made himself set his palm on the cedar again and count a slow six. The pull in his arm steadied. The pull obeyed what his bones knew about water and ignored what he thought a human body should do. He kept his body between her and the open edge of the hollow because habit was not a thing you fought when it wasn't hurting anyone.

526 They stayed in that shape until the patch of sun moved out of reach and the air cooled another degree. Emma opened her eyes and covered the edge of the scarf with her fingers on reflex. The green dimmed a shade without vanishing. She looked at Mitch and saw the way his mouth sat and for once did not argue with it. "I'm still here," she said. He dipped his chin. His breath eased; his jaw unclenched; he let the strap slacken a notch.

527 Sound from town carried to them as a faint layer without shape. There was a distant engine rise and then cut. A PA turned on and off twice. The words didn't ride this far through trees. The air tasted faintly of the same carrier from earlier. It wasn't strong. A roof somewhere would get that orange line. Tyler tilted his head. He had learned the difference in smells before he knew the names of the tanks. "They're still doing roofs," he said. "Not here. Two streets east of yesterday."

528 "Tonight at dusk," Emma said again. She got to her feet. She touched both zippers on her jacket without looking. Mitch checked the strap and turned the buckle again under to make sure. Tyler stood and popped his knees without it making a sound. They moved out of the hollow. The cache sat under the root.

529 They would move soon. The day was not done. None of the days were done now. They had seen who stayed. That did not make the next choice cleaner. It made it heavier and more exact. They carried the weight of it. It didn't crush. The measure of what they were about to do was clear.

Chapter 7

Photosynthesis

530 They stood at the hollow's rim while the trunks still held shade cool and the sound of town hadn't reached this far, after hours of breath work that set their limits. A narrow line of sun ran along the edge of the bowl. Emma stood with her toes in shadow and her heels in light, then shifted one pace and let the seam cross the scarf at her throat. The green under the cloth deepened in a band along the angle of her jaw. The tight tug at the base of her skull eased. She didn't close her eyes this time. She watched a cedar twig move because air moved there and held still everywhere else. Her shoulders set lower. She did not push it. After a slow count she stepped back into shade.

531 Mitch watched for the telltale reflex, the way her hand used to go up to hide it. It didn't. She adjusted the scarf to keep the edge flush with skin and checked zippers without looking down. It wasn't a show. It was a line: enough and no more. A folded square of shade cloth sat rolled at the top of her pack; for now the scarf was her boundary. His fingers twitched toward her scarf and then settled on the strap. He put his right palm on the cedar root where beard moss thickened and the leather wrist strap bit into gauze. The ache ran the same direction as yesterday and then tightened into one line instead of spray. He matched breath, four in, held two, out on six; the ache narrowed.

532 The tug spread under his hand in lines he could track. He didn't see it, he never saw it, but the lines sat there anyway in his bones. One feeder ran down toward Cherry, a main carried weight under Third, and farther west the basin pushed against something denser. Attention shifted without moving his hand, the way Tyler had shown him. The

dense patch held wrong. Less give. Less cool. He had felt patches like that under an old roadbed that had been compacted once and never recovered. This had the same dead, not from age. Something else had taken it. He slid his palm half an inch, corrected too much pressure, and breathed again.

533 “Talk it,” Tyler said from a crouch at the rim of the hollow. He didn’t hurry them. He watched the edge the way he always watched it.

534 “Dry zone,” Mitch said. He swallowed. His throat stayed rough from smoke even after one clear night. “Not far. East of here. Two blocks off the school. Feels like a sheet got laid down.”

535 “Gel roofs were two streets east of yesterday,” Tyler said. “They burned gutters. If gutters went, the siding went.”

536 “It’s not ash,” Mitch said. He kept his hand on the root. “It feels like, ” He stopped before saying what it felt like. He didn’t have to name it. Emma had said the gel left residue, the carrier glued fines and shut small pores. The dirt went tight and dry. This felt like that.

537 Emma stepped away from the light seam and set her palm low, near the place she had used yesterday, not on the root, close to it. She breathed with him, out longer than in. “We mark it,” she said. “We treat it as impediment. We don’t try to cut through it. We go around.”

538 He nodded without looking at her. He timed how long it took for the pull to settle each time he lifted and replaced his hand. First try landed wrong, swing. Second try hit. Third try hit faster. He took his hand off and kept the count going in his ribs to see if he could keep the line without contact. He lost it by the second breath. He put his hand back and it came back.

539 “We check proximity,” Emma said. “Not a theory. A field test.” She looked at Tyler. “We need to know if closeness helps him hold it.”

540 Tyler shifted a small rock with his boot out of habit. “Walk it,” he said.

541 They did. Emma walked light, keeping the scarf bracketed with her fingers and staying out of the sun stripe now that she'd had her piece. Mitch held the root with his hand and set the pull. Emma walked twenty paces back toward the path they'd come in on. The line inside Mitch scattered. It wasn't an image. It was a spray of sensation in his forearm that made his hand want to close into a fist. He did not let it. He breathed and kept count. He could still name the main, barely, but the basin spread instead of held.

542 "Back two," he said.

543 She took two steps in. The pull settled some. She came closer. His shoulder let go one notch.

544 "Here," he said. He nodded without looking. She stopped beside him and matched breath, four in and six out. The thread sharpened. The basin sat back in place. His jaw set. He kept her beside him.

545 "It stabilizes," Emma said. She did not call it anything more than that. "We use it."

546 "Right," Mitch said.

547 Mitch looked at the canteen by Tyler's knee. A wide-mouth stainless bottle, cool from being buried in duff. He reached for it with his left hand. Tyler had already unscrewed it and set the cap aside. Mitch pressed the cold metal to the gauze under the strap. The ache narrowed to a smaller channel and the nausea that jumped in his gut when it went too strong slid down and sat quiet.

548 "Light feels like food," Emma said. She kept her voice out of the hollow's echo. "Not metaphorically. It changes the ache, and it changes how I process what's happening under my skin. It's strange to say. It's true. If I take too much, my head spikes and my heart races. If I take just enough, I can think."

549 Mitch rolled the canteen a fraction to cover another square of his palm. "Water feels like the same thing," he said. "Not drinking. Touch.

Cold. Pipes feel like a tug. The bottle is a quiet.” He didn’t have other words. He didn’t need them.

550 “Rescue cadence,” Tyler said. He didn’t sit or stand; he held himself in that balanced place where he could go either way.

551 “While moving?” Mitch said.

552 “Yeah. Moving,” Tyler said. “You’ll get a spike not where you want it. You won’t get to stop. Two short inhales,” he said as they shifted gear, “one long out. No hold. Three cycles. If you can, while you move, switch to in six, hold one, out eight. If not, go back to the two-and-one until you have cover. Baseline stays four in, hold two, out six. Okay?”

553 Mitch copied him. It felt wrong for the first pass. On the second, his body got the message; his knee steadied. He could feel the count set low, not in his head but in the sides of his ribs where muscles sat that he never paid attention to unless he tore something.

554 Emma did the cadence and kept one finger at the edge of her scarf, not fiddling, just reminding herself of the line she’d set. When she finished the third long exhale she looked at both of them. “I keep the scarf on,” she said. “I take light later only if it’s inside the boundary.”

555 “Good,” Tyler said.

556 Mitch hooked a thumb under his strap and turned the buckle under so nothing flashed. He looked toward the tree line where the hollow’s protection ended and the houses began. “We go,” he said.

557 They left without extra words. Breath stayed even and set their pace. Air tasted like old smoke and the cleaner cold from cedar together. The hollow gave way to salal, sword fern, and old fence posts. No wind flags hung from any house; nobody was drying anything outside now.

558 They cut behind sheds and chain link until yards opened. By the time they got to the first back yard the air had changed. Smoke slid in under branches and curled into the shade. Mitch's ribs locked once on an inhale that didn't finish. A wave of heat pain came through from somewhere else and sat in his chest with weight. Emma flinched and put her palm flat against the scarf, not pressing, just anchoring. Tyler's head shifted a fraction as if his ear could pick direction out of pain. He raised two fingers, then dropped them, and set his own breath without words.

559 Mitch went down to a knee. Not a collapse. He caught himself on his left hand and kept the right off the dirt because he had learned that the lesson, too. The surge wasn't his alone. It moved through him like a bad current and then stuck in the strap, then in the strap and the root under his palm even though his palm wasn't on the root anymore. That didn't make sense. It still helped.

560 "Two in," Tyler said. "One long out. Now."

561 They did it together. Two sharp inhales through the nose, one smooth exhale through pursed lips to lengthen the out. The first long out dropped the edge. The second made the ground under Mitch's knee feel like ground again. On the third, the surge rounded off and set level like water in a glass that had been shaken and put down.

562 "Control burns," Tyler said. He didn't need to guess. The smell told him. Not forest fire. Not accidental. Gel and pressurized flame hitting a planned line.

563 Boot scuff and a low engine told the rest. A minute later Sheriff Lynn Okafor came through the gap between a hedge and a plywood privacy patch, breath checked after a run. Her uniform shirt sleeve was torn at the shoulder. Dried blood had set at her hairline and left a line down her temple where it had run. The bark edging along her jawline looked darker. Her eyes were clear. Her jaw had the same set Mitch had felt in his own face when he decided to pick a fight knowing he would pay for it that day and the next.

564 “They moved the schedule,” she said. She didn’t waste their time with greeting. She looked at Mitch’s strap and at Emma’s scarf, saw exactly what she needed to see and no more. “They’re calling it ‘stabilize by fire’ on the side channel. It is not in the public orders.”

565 Mitch stood without putting his right hand down. “Where?”

566 “Two blocks east of yesterday, then a jump to the north ridge. They’re selling it as wildfire mitigation on the radio,” she said.

567 “Which cross,” Mitch said.

568 “Newell,” she said. “I can stall one checkpoint, maybe. Not two. They’re consolidating. They’re not stupid.” The wave that had hit them had come out of the east; it lined up with her map. She reached down, keyed her radio to external speaker, then killed volume and repeated the gist while they listened for the echo.

569 “Mitigation.” Mitch’s jaw set.

570 The speaker clicked on. “...Proceed with control burns. Control. Control. Public comms: wildfire mitigation. Copy.” She killed it as fast as she had lit it.

571 Emma’s face didn’t change much when she went from thinking to deciding, but the line between her eyes deepened. “Dusk was the plan,” she said. “We don’t have that luxury across the whole board.”

572 “You still have it at the plant if you survive to get there,” Okafor said. She shifted weight and winced. The wound at her temple had crusted, but there was a deeper line under her shirt that pulled when she moved. “I can put my car across Newell and hold five minutes. Maybe eight if their shift turns right then. Don’t ask for more than that.”

573 “Five minutes is a gift,” Emma said. “Thank you.”

574 “After,” Okafor said. She glanced to the street. “No hero work at the front. The side pen. They keep overflow there when they don’t have vans ready. That’s how you cut it quick. You know this. Don’t let the badge reader trap you on the way out.” She looked at Tyler. “Kid. Keep

your head. Don't make me drag you." There was no insult in it.

575 Tyler's mouth twitched once like he had a response and decided not to spend it here. "We'll make you proud later," he said, deadpan. She snorted and shook her head once, which hurt. She let it hurt.

576 Mitch raised his chin. "Thanks," he said.

577 "After," Okafor said again. She stepped backward into the hedge seam and was gone in two steps, quiet as someone who had been moving this way longer than any of them knew.

578 Emma's hand was already in her pocket on her phone. She didn't light the screen. She checked the physical switch she had taped over the power and ringer a day ago and then looked to the alley. "We go now. Checkpoint first. Then I move to the school and start pushing bursts out after each contact. The plant holds for dusk. I'll be staged."

579 "Tyler and me go front," Mitch said.

580 Tyler nodded. "I keep him from getting shot and you from taking too much light," he said to Emma.

581 "You keep yourself breathing," she said. She touched him once on the sleeve at the elbow, not mothering, not posturing, and then let go. She looked at Mitch. "Five minutes of window at best. We don't stick to the old order because we liked the old order."

582 "We adapt," he said. "Yeah. We keep the plant."

583 She dipped her chin once. That was all it took.

584 They slipped along a drainage swale to the dry creek bed. They met again in a dry creek bed where once winter had put water and summer now put nothing but weed and trash. Emma stepped down into the shade and set her back against the cool cut bank. Mitch crouched

opposite with his knees against battered roots. Tyler stood at the opening and described the lane he wanted him to use with one hand. Then he pointed across the street and sketched the checkpoint in the air, two white trucks nose-to-nose, one on each side of the cross, a portable scissor gate on casters in the side lane near the feed store's side yard, a light tower near the center. The guard rotation made sense: the roving one never stayed roving long. He always went up front when someone in a vest looked their way.

585 "Order," Emma said.

586 "Checkpoint," Mitch said.

587 "School," Tyler said.

588 "Plant," Emma said. She made a small correction with her chin, then nodded to herself. "We hold the plant at dusk. We don't try it now and lose the camera gap for nothing."

589 "Bursts at each step," Emma said. "I push proof as we go so they chase optics. The canisters, the labels, faces where I can, not just feet and chaos. It makes us visible. It pulls attention off someone else. It changes what they can claim later."

590 "They'll track you," Mitch said. He didn't scold. He named cost.

591 "I know," she said. "I'll send smaller and staggered via people who don't ping. Not live streams. Bursts. Drives when possible. If my phone goes, it's a loss not a collapse."

592 Tyler had his hands in his hoodie pocket, not fidgeting, just keeping them ready. "I can get three steady if they're mid-change," he said. "Maybe four. No more. Breath and a hand on something living. If it's bare rock or metal, I need you to give me wood or dirt."

593 "Three's plenty," Mitch said. He looked at Emma and then at the dirt between his boots and hers. "You keep shade," he said. "If I see you in a strip, I'm pulling you back. We aren't doing that show-and-tell in front of them."

594 She huffed a half laugh without humor. “I’m not planning to burn from the inside,” she said. “I like my brain working.” Her face cut back to even. “I hold my boundary.”

595 “Signals,” Tyler said. “Three taps on your back means pull. Two means press. If you get one long press and then nothing else, it means I can’t talk and you need to move me, okay?” He looked at Mitch first and then at Emma. “We do not yell unless we’re already caught.”

596 Mitch reached over without looking like it was a big deal and squeezed Emma’s forearm just above the strap. He didn’t hold on. He put pressure there once and let go. It wasn’t apology. It wasn’t a plea. It was a contact he hadn’t given in a long time. She didn’t pull away. Something in him that had been held too tight eased one notch.

597 “Watches,” Emma said. Tyler didn’t wear one. He lifted his face and checked the sun through needles the way he always did. Sun a hand above the fir line; twenty breaths till her block. “Okafor’s five minutes will be messy,” Emma said. “We use the first twenty seconds for movement. We don’t stop if it gets loud. We shift to the side pen. We take what is in reach and we get out.”

598 Heat shimmered outside the creek bed. It didn’t move like wind. It moved like a field that had been heated from above. Heat wavered over gravel and weeds; flies stayed in shade. Comfort didn’t factor.

599 “Go,” Emma said.

600 They cut behind hedges until the yards thinned to alleys. The checkpoint had grown since yesterday. Two white trucks formed the block. The scissor gate had a box on the side of it with a company mark and a pad for a code. The light tower sat with its mast above the rooftops, lamps like pale suns turned off in daytime. A panel fence ran in a crooked L enclosing a side pen where they had stashed overflow waiting for a van.

The drone that liked the flagpole wasn't here; it would come when they paged it. The roving guard had the same springy walk and the same habit of touching his belt like the radio made him taller.

601 Mitch put his shoulder against cinderblock in the feed store alley. Tyler was low beside him. Emma wasn't here. She had gone two streets over to a noticeboard where she could stage and still see the front with a phone that stayed dark for anyone who looked.

602 "Count," Tyler said.

603 Mitch counted, not in numbers, but in breaths. Out was the measure. When he hit the sixth exhale he watched the roving guard turn his head to answer a call. That was every seventh, if you counted in breaths. He held it one more cycle for insurance.

604 "Ready," Emma's text came through with a single vibration. No words he had to read. One word in the screen if he needed to show Okafor had done what she said she would do. He didn't need to show anyone anything. A clipped siren burst blipped once from the far street. Heads turned like they had been trained by that sound.

605 Mitch slid the stubby pry bar from his pack and palmed the folding knife.

606 They moved. Mitch went for the scissor gate because he had built gates for temporary sites before and he knew where a pry bar would do the most with the least noise. The motor housing wasn't thick. He levered the seam open and pushed the bar in until it hit the gear. The bar slipped once; he reset the bite and drove it back in. He didn't snap anything. He locked the teeth so they would grind but not move. Tyler took two pebbles from nowhere and flicked them across the lot so they clicked off the far light tower base just loud enough to make the belt-touching guard look that way. Breath counted the space between each move.

607 A woman sat on the gravel in the side pen with her wrists zip-tied in front of her and blood dry at both knuckles where she had tried to get loose. A boy sat beside her. A man leaned against the panel fence with the

flat look of somebody deciding how long to wait before turning their head. Mitch didn't say anything. He cut the ties. The boy's hands came free. The boy didn't cry. The woman whispered, "Bless you," low enough that it didn't carry beyond the panel.

608 "Two taps means press," Tyler said under it. He touched the woman's shoulder twice. "When he pulls you, you go," he said to the man. The man nodded like he'd already done that calculation. He didn't ask where. He just nodded.

609 The roving guard picked up that something felt wrong. He didn't see them yet. He put his hand to his radio. Mitch heard the tiny relay click and knew the next thing would be the light tower waking and the sound of an alarm nobody could ignore. He ran.

610 The light tower had a pull choke and a toggle. He had worked these at road jobs. He pulled the choke hard and snapped the toggle down with the same hand. The generator coughed with a sound like an animal trying to clear something and died. The lights didn't even get a chance to flash. An alarm started anyway, another box, but a dead light tower took most of the field of the cameras with it. He hit the choke again for good measure. Nothing. The roving guard shouted. The other one moved to his left and then stopped like he couldn't believe it was already dark under the sun.

611 Emma's hands were steady two streets away where she stood near the noticeboard. With the light tower down and the alarm already calling all eyes forward, she sent the pre-drafted messages to dozen-person lists. Nothing fancy. No calls to war. Just times and routes. Move now. Back trail by the old pumphouse. Stay low and quiet. If you have to choose, choose woods. She didn't wait to see who read them. She sent the next batch to a second ring of people who would pass it to a third.

612 Mitch pushed the panel fence out where the pins sat loose at the top. Tyler took the boy's shoulder and then lifted his hand to show the kid how to breathe right now without crying or choking. Two short inhales.

One long out. The kid copied him exactly. They moved into the blind seam behind the feed store.

613 Then the shot. Not a warning. Not up. The roving guard fired into the fence line because the panel had moved and he didn't see what had moved it. The sound hit all of them at once. It hit something else, too. A man came out of the yard behind the feed store with a line of active fire low along his fence where gel had run. He had ridges across his chest like boards laid end to end under skin. They had not been there last week when he had stood with his hose in the same spot and sprayed water at a fire that hadn't cared. The bullet struck high on the wood-grained plates under his skin and made a hard, compact sound that wasn't flesh. The surface held tight, compact fiber under skin; the round glanced into gravel. Hot resin stung the air. Mitch's jaw locked; his next inhale clipped short. The man staggered; the impact landed under the clavicle and shifted him half a step. He didn't go down. He kept walking toward the two kids behind him who had been crouching under a picnic table.

614 The roving guard stopped moving. He looked at the place where the bullet had hit like the gun had betrayed him. He didn't fire again. He hesitated and that gave Mitch another second.

615 "Go," Mitch said without raising his voice. Two taps to the woman's shoulder. Two taps to the man's back. Press. They moved. The boy went with Tyler. The man steadied the woman with an elbow under her arm and didn't waste time asking where.

616 The alarm wailed. The light tower stayed dark because the choke stayed where Mitch had left it. Smoke blew across the lot in a single sheet when the wind shifted in a way that didn't help anybody with a camera.

617 Mitch and Tyler took the blind seam behind the feed store where the dumpsters and an old boat trailer made a narrow line that looked like it ended but didn't. Emma cut across to the alley parallel to them, staying in shadow and using the side of a garage for cover. She didn't run. She moved like she had count in her feet and watching eyes that always lost

track of where she actually was because she didn't make noise and she didn't lift her head.

618 Behind them, voices went loud. Someone said, "They're cutting ties." Someone else said, "Gate's stuck." Metal ground on metal as somebody tried to run the scissor gate with its motor locked and the gear teeth just complaining. The kid who had copied Tyler's breathing did it again on his own. Two short inhales. One long out. The woman matched him and didn't sob.

619 They didn't empty the pen. They didn't have time. They broke it open and took what was in reach and seeded movement for the next hour. People always watched. People who weren't the four they freed would see the gate stuck, the light tower dead, the alley with no one coming out of it with handcuffs. They would move later in ones and twos and threes and they would go where Emma's messages told them to go because that matched the way the air felt and the way the ground felt even to people who didn't touch roots and talk about it.

620 Mitch ducked around a trash bin where old feed sacks stank like damp grain and mold. His hand hit the canteen on his hip and he took the half-second it took to press the cold against gauze and shut the edge of the surge down. He heard the sound of Okafor's cruiser somewhere ahead, not full siren, just the engine and a horn tap once. He hoped she had kept that car between somebody's grandma and somebody's idea of order. He hoped and didn't wait around to find out.

621 They made the seam behind the hardware store and then the gravel lane beyond it. Tyler lifted his chin toward a line of vine maple where the shade deepened again. They went that way and didn't stop moving until the houses thinned and the low voice of wind moved in, not steady, but not gust either, just the way it moved in this place when the day heated and the ground ate it.

622 Mitch put his hand against a stump where someone had cut a small tree last year. He didn't like it. It wasn't right to cut if you didn't

need it, not now. He liked it anyway because it was wood. He breathed. Emma came up alongside him and put her palm against the dirt and loose duff near the stump and didn't take the scarf off.

623 "Your bursts?" Mitch said.

624 "Out," she said. "Not everything, not everywhere. Enough to move bodies. Enough to set the record. The call about 'mitigation' is on clips now. The canister label from the plant's in the same package. The names at the gym are for later. I'll keep those in my pocket until we need them."

625 He nodded and didn't try to say thank you in a way that would make it a ceremony. He kept breath count and he kept the canteen near and he kept his hand on wood. Tyler's eyes were bright and not wild. He took one step farther into shade and put his back against a trunk, then pushed back off it like he had only needed the slightest touch to set himself right again.

626 Smoke thinned for a minute. Then it thickened again. Heat stayed hard. No letup. People moved on the sides of streets where there hadn't been people walking all morning. Two men stood talking in a yard with their hands up, not surrendering, just in that posture people take when they don't want to be seen reaching into pockets. No one fired at them. No one moved them yet.

627 They had cut the checkpoint in half. It still stood. It wasn't what it had been thirty minutes ago. It would be loud now. It would be meaner now. It would draw more force to it and leave other places thin. That was the point and the problem. They would use the new holes before the company could plug them. That was how they would have to live the rest of the day.

628 "Dusk," Emma said. She looked at both of them and didn't have to explain which site she meant. "If we still have hands."

629 "We will," Mitch said. His voice wasn't bravado. It was a place to put the next step.

630 “School next,” he added.

631 They went back into the line of trees where the ground
remembered rain.

Chapter 8

Controlled Burn

⁶³² Smoke laid down across the lots, not high and fast but low, a brown film that turned patios into pockets and alleys into moving seams. The Newell checkpoint still yelled in that clipped way, men trying to put their voices where they wanted the world to go. Metal scraped. Alarm. The light tower stayed dead. Mitch kept a hand over the bandage and felt the strap edge bite against gauze. The cold he had pressed there minutes ago had already gone to air.

⁶³³ Ahead, the man they had seen take a bullet moved without hurry through a fence line burning low with gel. The plates across his chest and upper arms held color from heat, a duller brown striped deeper near the edges. Flame licked and died against that surface. Resin scent punched through the old smoke and then eased. The two guards at the corner stepped back without planning it. The one with the slicked haircut tried to hold a line with his voice. The air made his throat small. He stumbled against the gate box, caught himself, and swore.

⁶³⁴ The man did not raise his hands. He didn't run. He turned past them toward two kids who were no longer hiding under the picnic table because hiding had stopped being a thing that kept them from being seen. Heat had rewritten that rule. The older one carried the little one on his hip. The older one looked up once when Mitch raised a hand. Mitch pointed past the houses where cedar and alder had knit a corridor behind fences. The older one nodded, shifted the small body, and ran without turning his head again. The father followed, a half step lagging. His shoulder hit the panel fence; the panels rattled and held.

⁶³⁵ A rifle clattered. The man holding it had a blank face and then he had empty hands. He left it. He was already moving. The man with the slicked hair swore again, not at anyone, just into the air in front of him. Shouts distorted over radio in that way compression does when orders pile up. A word about perimeter. A word about optics. More words about control.

⁶³⁶ Mitch tried not to look long at the plates baked under skin and the way flame failed to step across them. He wasn't sure if the feeling in his own chest came from the sight or from a change in the ground. He dropped the strap a finger width down and touched two knuckles against a cedar post at a shed corner. The pull split then grabbed a single direction. Water sat shallow under the roadbed and under the gravel aprons at the corners. Not empty. Not generous. Enough to move. It shifted under the cross street like a door being pulled partway open. Dust near the lane darkened by a shade that wasn't light. A skiff of damp spread and stopped the way a hand on a shirt stops a fire from climbing up it.

⁶³⁷ He held the shape and let it be a thing happening, not a thing he did. The body wanted to claim it. He didn't let that happen. He counted once under his breath and then again in the ribs without sound. The count steadied him on its own with the strap in place. He felt Tyler beside him copy the same count without looking at him.

⁶³⁸ "Go," Mitch said to the father. He lifted two fingers and pressed them twice against his own shoulder. Press. The man nodded again without asking for a map he couldn't use right now. He went where the other had gone.

⁶³⁹ They kept to cover. Smoke gave more than it took for a few minutes, unless you had lungs already working too hard. It blurred patrol lines. It hid gestures. It turned cameras into dark glass. It also made children cough and made older people swallow wrong so they choked a little. Ground held low sound under it. A hum that had not been there in the same way when the day started. Mitch could track it without dropping

to a knee.

640 When they cleared two back yards and a narrow run between a shed and a line of blackberries, the school lifted on the right, the gym bulk flat and windowless in this section. The side service door sat in from the corner with the same scuffed push plate and the same badge reader nested above it. The maglock liked to hold.

641 Mitch took his phone out. He had set it to silent earlier and killed the light. He typed one word with his thumb and sent it.

642 Go.

643 They'd timed the building's strike; the maglock lifted.

644 The reply came in the way the hall changed behind the door. It went from dead to air moving across linoleum. A latch released with that tight click a powered strike makes when power lifts and the load shifts off metal. Mitch held the crash bar down with his forearm and eased the door in enough for them to pass. He kept his right hand clear. He didn't want the bandage to print or leave any thread.

645 Inside, bleach. Old gym varnish under that. The low hum of a portable AC unit somewhere off to the left. The bright lights in the main room hadn't come on yet. The bright lights weren't the point here during the day. Bright lights came on for the night show and to make camera fields clean.

646 Rows of cots still cut the floor into lanes. Folding chairs sat against one set of pulled bleachers. People lay on the cots or sat slow with their feet on the floor and their hands in their laps. Wrist tags in marker had neighborhood codes written on them. RIV. NR. EAST. Two letters added to some, A, B, C. Near the wall, a whiteboard listed sectors and trial letters. RIVER: B. NORTH RIDGE: A. EAST: C. Underneath, a column with an empty header had a list of numbers and initials. Someone had wiped a corner with a sleeve and left a smear. There was a vinyl banner strung under the scoreboard that said COMMUNITY CARE with the company mark stamped on the left.

647 Emma stood with a dark scarf high at her neck and a duffel at her feet. Her phone stayed in her hand without a face lit. She had already crossed to two people closest to the aisle and cut the plastic ties binding their wrists. She and Tyler did not talk. He took the cut ties out of her hand and put them in his pocket. He moved to the next cot. A woman with her hair matted at the back of her head and dirt on her cheek waited without blinking and then held her hands out without being asked. Mitch stepped to the door and dragged a maintenance bin over from the corner. He wedged it so the door could not blow open or shut unless someone moved the bin and the bar in the right order. He dropped a mop handle through the crash bar against the frame. It wasn't elegant. It would slow a hand on the outside. She'd taken the blind seam after his text.

648 "Two taps means press," Tyler said softly to a man whose eyes had rolled without purpose since they came in. He tapped the man's shoulder twice. The man rose into that instruction better than into any word like calm. Tyler went to a kid who had both hands clamped on his own forearm. "Two in," he said. "One long out." The kid copied his mouth shapes and his own body learned it on the second try.

649 A girl crouched by a cot where a woman lay with her eyes open. The girl looked too long at Mitch and then past him at the service door. She stood up without moving her feet. "They took some downstairs," she said, throat dry. "They didn't come back."

650 "Where," Mitch said.

651 She pointed with two fingers at the corridor where they had come in and then to the right. He nodded once. Emma had her phone up and he thought she was filming until he saw that she wasn't. She was taking stills. The whiteboard. The cots. A tag on a wrist that showed RIV-B in black marker. The corner of the banner. Her shots always showed two things at once. That was habit now.

652 They moved into the corridor. It turned right and went down three steps to a storage bay. Metal cages with rolling doors held balls and

nets where they had them. Only a few did. The rest held boxes with hazard symbols and canisters with the same tree-and-fish symbol he had watched men tip toward the intake. Syringe boxes sat on a cart with masking tape labels in two hands. One neat. One not. The neat one said DOSE 1/ DOSE 2 and had initials after weights. The other had Trial B - 1.0 mL / Trial C - hold until call.

⁶⁵³ Emma was already moving. She leaned the duffel against a cage and swept dosing sheets into it. She photographed the masking tape label, then the boxes, then a stamp on the side of a canister showing an out-of-state address and a toll-free number. She moved to the next shelf. Her hands stayed steady. Her scarf covered everything it needed to. The green that sometimes crept toward her ear stayed under the cloth. She breathed and he knew the count she used without hearing it.

⁶⁵⁴ Footsteps hit linoleum. Not near yet. Getting closer.

⁶⁵⁵ “Back,” Tyler said. He had a boy with him whose tag read EAST-C. “Two taps means press.” He touched the boy’s shoulder and then did the same to the woman behind him. Mitch held up a hand and the two stopped at the line where the corridor narrowed.

⁶⁵⁶ Two uniforms and a vest came around the corner with a taser out in front and a hand on a radio held at the chest to talk into it. The taser man saw Mitch first and then saw the people behind him. His face went hard and empty. He raised the taser and fired. The darts hit a man who had stepped forward from good cover without being told to. Mitch had seen him in town outside the Pine Mart on a day when heat drove everyone into the store for cold water. His arms now had ridges that were not muscle. The prongs lodged and he stiffened but did not fall. He made a small sound that was pain and stayed on his feet. The wires burned a scent that wasn’t hair. The vest man took one step back. He hadn’t counted on any of this.

⁶⁵⁷ Mitch pressed two fingers twice into the shoulders of the two at the front and moved them past him into the corridor. Emma dumped the

rest of the pages she could reach into her bag and zipped it without fumbling. She took three more stills in the time it took for the taser man to decide whether to reload. He did not. He dropped the taser. He reached for his baton and then dropped that, too, because his grip and stance were wrong for a baton. The vest man raised his radio and said words about a breach and a storage room. His voice did not ride steady.

658 “Go,” Mitch said. He kept his voice low. He touched the boy’s shoulder twice again and the kid moved. Emma held her bag in her off hand and used her other hand to pick the prongs out of the man’s forearm. She did it fast and it hurt him again. He didn’t swear. He leaned his forehead against the caged door for a breath, then picked his head back up and went with them, staying in the space Mitch made for him.

659 On the way back along the corridor, they passed a metal equipment cage half shut with a padlock hanging open, either not clicked or clicked and failed. A woman with a bend in her spine stood with her hands around the bars and her mouth thin. She made a sound that had words under it. Emma turned and put her bag down. Mitch braced the door with his heel. He took the lock, twisted, and the hasp broke where rust had eaten one side. The door swung. The woman stepped backward into the man who sat inside with a wrist tag that read NR-A. She put both hands on his face the way you do when you need to see someone and not a picture you’ve made of them. Disinfectant and sweat are thick in the cramped cage air. He made the same sound she had made and then stopped. He didn’t leave the cage because his legs wouldn’t do what legs do right away. Mitch looked for one second and then lifted his chin toward Tyler. His thumb found the strap; one slow count.

660 “Two taps,” Mitch said. He did not want the room to turn into sprint and crush. Tyler tapped the man’s shoulder twice, then the woman’s. They moved and the rest of the hallway learned from their bodies what to do. They did not try to free everyone from every cage. They opened what they could open without bottleneck. A steady look passed down the row; bodies shifted to clear a lane. They did not throw elbows in

a way that would put an elder on the floor.

661 Back through the service door, Mitch kicked the maintenance bin with his boot so it moved when they pushed and then fell back into place after the last person passed. He did the same with the mop handle. Emma's face had wet at the corners and dried already. She had not stopped to wipe it. The whiteboard shots and the tape labels and the trial letters lived in her phone now and on a second device she had already shoved the data toward in the corridor between the gym and the storage bay because that was the only time she had.

662 They moved under sheets that had been left on lines in back yards and behind shrubby borders that hadn't been watered and so were brittle to the touch. People who couldn't run did not run. They went on their feet and on their will. Kids copied Tyler's two-in, one-out cadence. Adults watched them and did it without naming it.

663 The gym kept yelling behind them and then a new alarm layered on the first one. A helicopter moved across town and then another at angle. The light fell faster now. Shadows stopped being shade and started being the rest of the day.

664 "Plant," Emma said at the corner where a chain-link fence had a top strand missing and a dead limb leaned over it. She kept her voice low. She checked the scarf with one hand and cinched the duffel tight with the other. "Dusk window."

665 Mitch nodded. He reached for his canteen and pressed it to the gauze. A brief, exact relief followed warmth with a hard edge that reminded him where his hand ended. He wanted that line. He needed that line. He slid the canteen back on and climbed the fence without putting his right hand down. Tyler dropped, rolled, and came up on his feet. They cut across a disused lot where someone had stacked pallets in a heat that had dried them out so much that any stress made them crack at the nails. He stepped around them.

666 They took the back-lot seam east; sirens dopplered west under thicker smoke.

667 The plant perimeter fence waited where it always was. The slab under the chain-link had cracked where cedar roots had lifted it. The gap stayed big enough for a man to get through if he kept one shoulder low and turned his head. Mitch went first, then held the fabric for Emma so her scarf wouldn't snag and pull. Tyler slid beside her and stayed between her and the open lane. Mitch kept count of the cameras. He had done the path enough that his body matched the schedule without a watch.

668 They reached the headworks. The tech by the intake wore hearing protection and had one hand on a clear hose. He had primed the pump and was waiting for pressure to settle before opening the valve. The port gleamed with fresh coupler threads. The canister on the dolly had the same dead tree-and-fish symbol and the same numbers on a white label with a long code underneath. The smell of carrier cut through everything else.

669 Mitch moved to the breaker panel and pulled the handle hard. The cheap latch popped. His hand wanted to reach further in to find the muscle memory of work he had not done at jobs with fans and belts and safeties because he had never had that job. He went back to this: handle down. Power off. The tech looked up too slow. Mitch spun to the gate valve the hose ran to and put the wrench on it by feel. It resisted hard. He switched hands, pain spiking under the strap, and ran in four, hold two, out six while exposed. He found the wedge angle from logging days and leaned the wrench. Then it gave. The pump stayed running half a second on inertia and then wound down with a sound that told anyone who knew pumps that something was wrong.

670 Emma was already at the dolly. She moved the canister off the coupler before the tech got there. The tech reached for her and then didn't grab her because there was a strap over her shoulder that held a duffel and his hand went to the wrong thing. Emma stepped away with the canister and tipped it. She did not pour it into the headworks. She

poured it into the ditch that ran along the plant margin where water from the slab went when it rained. Root mats from alder and willow had colonized the edges. The stuff foamed when it hit the tangle and darkened the zone just off the edge. The foam laced around the white strands and then settled. On contact, the foam lost its slickness and a wet rot odor rose off the mat. The smell hit and faded slower here.

⁶⁷¹ “Containment,” Emma said. It was a field word, not a promise. She shot three stills that showed the foam, the canister code, and the root mat edge in the same frame. She turned and photographed the pump’s idle readout and the dead needle on a gauge that should have been moving. Then she lowered the phone, slid it, and it did something small she had programmed it to do without announcing itself.

⁶⁷² The first guard who hit the concrete ran too fast. He slipped where the damp had spread around the ditch edge and the hose. He slid on one knee and one palm. His baton popped out of his belt and went under the dolly. He cursed in a way that told the second guard exactly how fast to come and how little he should trust the ground under his own boots.

⁶⁷³ “Bar,” Mitch said, low. Tyler didn’t ask what he wanted. He had already seen the scrap pile by the wall. Mitch grabbed a length of steel from a broken rack and drove it between the coupling and the pump housing under the shroud where protection had never been put back on after maintenance. It jammed exactly where he wanted it. If someone tried to restart, the coupling would grind and stop. They would need a mechanic, a bucket of parts, and hours without anyone yelling in their ear before they could make it right.

⁶⁷⁴ The vest man’s radio barked, “Two minutes to restart.” Tyler cut them left of the hose and cleared the lane.

⁶⁷⁵ Another man in a vest rounded the corner with his hand on a radio. He looked at Emma. Then at Mitch. Then at the tech who was standing with his hands spread a little because he had decided that not

moving was the safest thing to do. The vest man's jaw set, but the scene had already slid away from the shape he needed.

676 "Pictures," Emma said. She did not whisper. She did not raise her voice. She moved her phone in and took four more shots of the labels and the dead pump. Then she hit send on a set of prebuilt bursts to people whose phones never left airplane mode unless it mattered. The messages would hop from there on other devices. The file names were numbers and letters that meant nothing. The pictures meant everything.

677 For a breath or two, sound cut down. The pump stayed still. The tech's hearing protection hung around his neck and the cups clacked together. Mitch felt his chest push against his shirt and then he let the air out slow and the ribs went where they belonged.

678 "We did it," he said, eyes on the dead needle and the dry coupler. He kept it quiet.

679 Emma looked at the ditch where foam was settling in the weave of roots. She looked at the pump that wasn't moving and at the shroud with the steel bar wedged under it. She didn't smile. "For this minute," she said.

680 They didn't run. They moved out on the line they already knew, between the panels of shade that held in places where the light from the plant spilled and where it didn't reach. A drone whined somewhere above town but not over them yet. An alarm tried to find a rhythm and failed. The ozone smell from the yard faded; the woods air carried heavier pollen and a deeper ground hum.

681 Under the cedar, the hum that had sat in the ground earlier felt thicker. The line of it wasn't one line anymore. It ran in bands. It came up into Mitch's palm without him putting it there. He went to a knee at the edge of the hollow and pressed his hand on the root where he had learned to do that the right way. His shoulders eased on their own angle. The bite under the strap narrowed to a clean pain that he could use as a tool and not a wall.

682 Emma stood in a seam of dim light that came through needles like a sieve. The green under her scarf lifted in a band along her jaw. The stripe spread a finger's width and stopped, the band under her skin tracking the heavier air load. She watched the dust in the light. That was what he thought it was at first. It wasn't only dust. The air held more bodies than dust. Pollen moved in a weight that hadn't been there the same way this morning. Some motes were heavier and spun a little when they hit a bit of air-noise from his breath. Some were just a powder that turned in that slow fall and did not settle fast.

683 "Air load is up," Emma said. "Not a little. This late. The canopy is pushing."

684 "The plant?" Mitch said. He meant the plant on the hill. He meant all plants in earshot. He didn't have the language she had.

685 "Stress reproduction," she said. Grains clung to the scarf weave. "Ground is burned and sealed in places. Insects are down with spray. They're moving more to air." She put her hand to her scarf and pressed the edge back down where it had started to lift with the angle of her jaw. The green under her skin did not brighten. It held and then dimmed a shade when she stepped back into cleaner shade. She kept her breath in that count that was theirs now. In four. Hold two. Out six. The hum under Mitch's palm grew and then smoothed to something steadier.

686 A movement up on the ridge caught his eye. Not deer. Not someone from town cutting through. Even at distance, you could tell the way trained people put their feet down. He saw the sharp rectangle of binoculars and a line of shoulders around the woman who carried the radio at center like it belonged to her the way the strap on your wrist belongs to you. He did not need to see her face to know who she was.

687 The sheriff's radio clicked in Mitch's pocket. He shouldn't have had it. He had it anyway because Okafor had slipped it into his hand earlier and told him not to talk into it. She told him he might need to hear. The speaker crackled and then fixed the voice floating out of it.

Calm. Measured. Familiar now.

688 “Zero if necessary,” the voice said. The strap bit once. Then the radio went to the other end of that exchange. A man with a short answer. “Copy.” Then nothing for three beats. Then more ordinary words about staging and screens and outer lines. Mitch looked up over the rim of the hollow. On the ridge, the woman with the radio had her jaw set in a way he knew. He had seen it in his own face in a mirror when he had made decisions that didn’t leave clean hands.

689 Helicopter rotors moved closer. A gray tail crossed the gap above the facility and turned. Another came in from north. The sound sewn to that sight made the space between trees go small. Nothing in those machines knew this place. They were here anyway with a plan that had no room in it for people he loved.

690 His phone vibrated in his pocket. A text from Okafor, one line only. They’ll burn the lab.

691 His hand tightened without instruction. The strap bit. The point in his palm that had started this whole part of his life pressed against the gauze. Heat rose there. He kept his hand on the root. He held the surge down. He counted the out-breath and stretched it for a second and then another.

692 “They’ll erase it,” Emma said. “Not only bodies. Records. Gear.” The export manifests and the treatment records first. The duffel strap on her shoulder sat heavy. He could see the corner of the dosing sheet inside where it bent and where the paper had absorbed sweat.

693 Tyler stood at the rim with his hood back. He watched the ridge without looking around the root to do it because he already knew where to stand to see without being seen. “We don’t have days,” he said. “We don’t have morning.”

694 “Service tunnels,” Emma said. She didn’t say them with any promise. She said them the way you say a door and mean it. Mitch nodded. They all knew the line that ran under the slope and into the

lower wing from the planning days and from Tyler's grandmother's stories about the old utility runs that maintenance workers had used when the place still fixed broken things instead of breaking what worked.

695 Mitch stood. He kept his bandaged hand close and angled his body to keep it out of the slice of last light. He looked at each of them and then toward the ridge again where a helicopter settled in a hold and then moved. He moved first because that was how he stayed steady. He stepped out of the hollow and toward the old line down-slope through the understory that would take them under the lip of the hill and to the hatch with the warped hinge that Tyler had found with a stick days back when this part of the day had still held time in it.

696 "Now," he said. No one argued. Emma adjusted her scarf and tightened the duffel. Tyler lifted his chin, listened for a count only he heard, and then set his foot on the path.

697 They didn't look back at the ditch where foam had turned brown. They didn't look back at the gym where alarms had braided into a rope. The town spoke under their feet. The hum ran strong. The ground still remembered rain even this late in the season. They went toward the lab to keep anything worth saving from turning to smoke.

698 The edge under everything had not gone away. It had just changed shape. That was a truth he could work with. He placed his palm to wood one more time before they dropped behind the ridge and let the pain mark the place where he stopped and the rest started. Then he moved fast because there wasn't a choice anymore, only a clock someone else had started.

Chapter 9

Corporate Harvest

699 Tyler found the hinge by memory and the flat end of a pry bar he'd stashed there on an earlier pass. The hatch had warped on its pins; the corner lifted when he levered and the metal scraped against poured concrete. Cold air came up as if a basement exhaled. It smelled of cleaner, the kind that dries your eyes, and of plant rot held too long in a drain. Mitch crouched and put his left hand on the edge. He kept his right hand tucked against his side the way he had learned to do when the ache started to wander. The leather strap pinched and kept the border clear. He breathed in for four, held for two, let it out for six while Tyler worked the hinge. Emma held the scarf to her neck with one hand and balanced the duffel against her hip with the other.

700 "Go," Tyler said, barely above the hatch scrape.

701 Mitch slid through first. The ladder was sleeved pipe with paint flaking off. His boots knocked rust and dust. A bare bulb glowed a stop down the run. He hit a concrete pad and moved. Emma followed, then Tyler pulled the hatch from below until it seated with a dead sound. Their shadows crossed each other on the wall and then settled on the floor like stains.

702 The service tunnel was low. Conduit ran along one side with tie wraps every few feet. A line of chilled pipe sweated under a tape with stamped letters that caught the bulb light. The letters were the kind used on any utility job and they told you nothing about what rode inside beyond temperature and flow direction. The air stung the back of Mitch's throat with a faint acid. He tasted metal. He tasted something sweet under it, the sweetness that rode wet compost when it went bad.

703 He set his breath and checked the strap buckle by feel. Still turned under. No glint for a camera. He kept his palm off the raw concrete and brushed conduit instead when he needed to steady. The conduit was dead metal. It did not pull.

704 "Left at the junction, then the ladder down," Tyler said. He spoke as if the tunnel was an alley he'd used since he was a kid. "The lab wing runs past. The atrium's past that."

705 Emma had taped the hardware switch on her phone. She slid it out and kept it dark. The light strips along the ceiling hummed and then clicked into a stronger output as if a sensor registered bodies. The hum made the tunnel a narrow instrument that had been tuned for a use they did not share.

706 At the junction, a single red EXIT sign cast its one command at a right they did not take. Tyler held fingers up: two, then down. He counted their breaths with his hand without talking. He pointed to the ladder. Mitch went. The ladder was colder and the air under it carried the cleaner smell heavier. He moved fast without running. The breath count set a speed that did not strip out judgment. His ears tracked footsteps that were theirs and nothing else. A distant machine thumped and slowed and thumped again.

707 The lower run opened into a narrow corridor of painted block. A door off to the left had a wire-glass square and a push bar. Tyler flattened and looked through. Closed. No one in frame. He pushed the bar with the meat of his hand and eased the door back before it could catch a hinge squeal.

708 Inside, a room held stainless tables with drains, light arms with swivels, and a sink with a foot pedal. A plastic tub of gauze sat open next to a tray of clamps, each nested in another. It looked like a clean room with handling for bodies, not glassware. Mitch stepped two paces and stopped. His jaw locked without any thought attached to it.

709 On the nearest table lay a man whose torso had been opened along the midline. The edges were held with retractors. The muscle around the cut was not red the way a fresh cut is red. The tissue had browned toward the edges and the layer under it had a sheen that looked damp but did not bead. Within the cavity, bands crossed areas where vessels should have been. The bands had ring lines. They matched the narrow ridges Mitch had seen on Cindy's knuckles. Someone had taped paper flags onto the bands. Each flag had a code written in a neat hand: "CV-L2," "aux flow," an arrow toward the sternum. A small card at the foot listed an intake time and three initials in the signature line.

710 Near the sternum lay a shape that did not fit the memory of any heart Mitch had seen in hunting or injury. It had the general size and chambers but half the outer surface had a woodgrain pattern rising where the muscle should have stayed smooth. It moved. The movement was slow. It did not squeeze and rebound with the pacing they all learned to trust. It squeezed with a long effort that did not match any rhythm in the room. A line led into a vein and a drip bag fed a thin ripple into the tube, set to keep something from crashing while it changed into something else.

711 Emma bent at the waist and caught the sink edge with her fingers. The metal was clean and cold. She made one sound and shut it down. Mitch stepped behind her and put his left hand between her shoulder blades. He did not press hard. He ran her count with his own mouth without making air. Her shoulders found the count. She lifted and set her feet. When she turned, her face was gray. The green band under the scarf had edged darker along her jaw. She pulled a breath in and out until her body agreed to use the air on offer.

712 She lifted her phone. The taped switch stayed dark. She still took photographs. She framed labels with tissue bands in the same shot. She shot the slow-moving half-wood heart without getting too close to shadow it. With each still, into the phone, for the record, she named a thing.

713 "Research wing, lower level side lab," she said, voice steady now. "Specimen tag reads RIV-B. Cambium-band labeling with arrows to sternum. Heart shows lignified surface on lateral face. Drip maintains. Time stamp: twenty-one forty-seven."

714 Mitch watched her hands. The first shot shook a little. The second did not.

715 Tyler stood at the doorway. He had not stepped inside. He had put his body where he could see the hall and still see their faces. He kept one palm against the painted block like he wanted his skin to read what the building was doing even when his eyes had to watch for people. He said nothing.

716 The next room held gurneys lined up with straps over wrists and hips. Faces slack. Tape over eyelids in lines that kept salt from drying them out. Printed tags at ankles: "SPECIMEN," then a barcode, then sector and trial letter: "NR-A," "EAST-C." On a cart sat three suture kits, unused. A white board across the room listed numbers and initials; two were circled in red. A case of syringes sat on the floor unlocked with masking tape notes across the lids.

717 Emma moved along the row. She touched no bodies. She took three stills of the ankle tags and the barcodes and a wider shot that caught the whole wall of recorded initials. She lifted one masking tape lid and photographed the top box. DOSE 1/ DOSE 2 was there in the same neat hand from the lab, weights and initials. A second strip of tape on another box read, "Trial C - hold until call."

718 A door at the far end banged open and a man in scrubs walked in with a tray. He looked at Mitch first and then at the shape of him. His mouth emptied of everything he thought he had to say and filled with one plan. He pivoted toward the red pull triangle over the crash cart. Mitch did not let him get there. He took two steps, put one hand on the tray, and the other on the man's shoulder, and drove him into the tray cart. The cart rolled and then stuck when one wheel hit a floor drain. Stainless

trays bounced. One clanged when it hit the tile. A sound like a bell carried down the hall. The scrubbed man went with the cart and stayed down.

719 Somewhere a tone started. It was not a bell for a fire exit. It was a steady, electronic tone that made your jaw bone vibrate. Mitch did not wait for its second pulse to start running.

720 "Brakes," Tyler said. He moved fast at the gurney ends. He flipped the red pedals up with the edge of his shoe and hit the quick-release latches with two fingers and a thumb. The straps popped. He put two taps on the shoulder of the first person who looked like they could stand. The man's eyes opened past the tape. Two taps meant move. Tyler offered an arm with the third touch and the man swung his legs and stumbled toward the edge. His forearms had patterning that had hardened into plates. He pushed with those and got upright. He reached back without speaking and lifted a woman up with him. She stood because he told her body she could with the way he held her elbow.

721 Emma moved to the other side. She did not talk. She cut two straps with a short blade and pulled tape from a woman's eyelids with one hand steady and one hand fast. The woman blinked and then held the edge of the gurney as if she was holding the side of a boat.

722 "Two in," Tyler said to a boy whose mouth had gone tight. "One long out." He shaped the words slow. The boy did it. He did it again. When his breath held steadier than the tone in the room, he made his legs do what legs do.

723 "Go," Mitch said, low. He put two taps on a shoulder and pointed to the door. He put his knuckles to the painted block without thinking and the pull came through the wall the way it always came when there was soil near. Under it was concrete and then fill and then older soil. The lines that marked water sat below all that, running toward the east. Emma came abreast of him and touched her scarf to steady her edge. The line held sharper under his palm.

724 They moved into the next corridor with the tone riding the ceiling. Plastic sheeting hung half rolled along one side. The edge had strips of yellow tape with biohazard symbols every foot. The sheeting snapped against air movement as people went past. A carton of canisters with the dead tree-and-fish symbol on the side sat near the corner. The corner of the top label had lifted where a hand had pressed and sweat had softened the adhesive.

725 Emma took a still of that corner and the label code and the symbol. She spoke into the phone: "Research wing corridor. Product staged in path of detainee movement."

726 The shipping bay opened ahead with a forklift lane taped on the floor. The smell changed. Diesel and hydraulic oil came in under the cleaner. The room was brighter. Fluorescent strings hung between beams and cast a hard light over rows of crates. The crates were banded with steel strapping. Green stencils said "EVERGREEN" on the sides, and to the right of that were numbers and letters that used the same block type as the plant's safety signage but added codes that read military to anyone who had ever seen a supply room at a base. Some labels listed airports and cities in other states. The crates were human height and higher, stacked two, sometimes three. Three pallet jacks sat silent with their tongues under loads.

727 On a broken pallet near a dock, a clipboard lay with a manifest under a metal clip. Emma came to it and brought the phone down over the paper. She didn't rush words. On camera, she read: "Adaptive Physiology Trials. Example: NR-A thirty-four. Codes on camera."

728 A backup alarm started beeping as a forklift came into the bay. The driver worked a load toward the dock, head on a swivel because the tone had pulled guards and techs into motion. A guard with a sidearm drawn came through from the far side. He leveled it in a way that said training but not certainty. The barrel swung past a moving pallet and then past the gap where Mitch and Tyler had gone to ground behind two crates.

729 Mitch peered through the hand holes on the crate side and saw the truck. The box truck sat backed to a dock door with the roll-up lifted three feet, maybe a touch more. The lift gate glinted. Inside, three gurneys were lashed into channel rails. Each had a SPECIMEN tag. The first woman's hair had fallen across her face and stuck to the skin there. Her chest rose and fell shallow under a strap that had been pulled too tight across the ribs. The nylon had already cut a line into her skin.

730 No other plan fit. He touched Tyler's sleeve and moved. Tyler went with him, not questioning the lane. They crossed the space in the forklift's shadow. Tyler went to the lift and jammed a wheel chock into the slot where the lift arm would have to descend. He kicked it hard with the edge of his boot until the rubber bit and folded. Then he put his shoulder under the roll-up and bore the weight so it would not drop.

731 Climbing into the truck well, he kept his right hand clear. He took the folding knife from his left pocket and opened it with his nails and his thumb the way you do when you have only one hand you can use for that. The nylon was tough the way transport nylon is tough, meant not to give if you twist it. He didn't twist. He cut. Two bands parted on the first gurney. He put two taps on the woman's shoulder. Her eyes came open and the person inside them came forward. She moved to rise. He got his shoulder under her shoulder and took a share of her weight. Behind him, Emma's voice carried in steady pieces into the phone: "Truck dock, three gurneys, SPECIMEN tags NR-A and EAST-C." She moved nearer without stepping into the line of fire and kept the phone on the codes.

732 A guard shouted and took a step. Before Mitch could track all of it, a shot cracked through the bay. A woman near the crate line turned because she had heard the guard's draw and put herself between the barrel and two kids. The round hit where her shirt had darkened in a pattern that had not been printed on the fabric. It hit the plates that had come up under her skin. The sound changed when it hit. Resin scent came up sharp and clean under the oil and the cleaner. She staggered, took one step back, and then stood on her feet because they still worked.

The guard's eyes moved through three choices at once and then failed to pick one. He took his finger off the trigger. The forklift driver froze with his load half turned and the beeping made every sound after it harder to hear.

733 "Tell them we're not gone," the woman on the first gurney said. Her voice scratched and hit clear at the end of the sentence. She had found Emma with her eyes.

734 "I will," Emma said. She kept the phone on the truck codes and then on the woman's face and hand and tag all in one field of view.

735 The second gurney straps cut easier once Mitch found the angle. His blade snagged in the weave once; he rocked it free where the strap had caught a rail. Tyler's shoulder had gone red where the roll-up's rubber edge pressed through his hoodie. He did not move.

736 "Two in," Tyler coached the man on the second gurney when he tried to sit all at once. "One long out."

737 The man did it. He fell back once, then found his own count and got to his feet. He had blood dried along his ear where a clip had pulled out too hard. He came off the truck well with Mitch's hand on his elbow. The third gurney held a boy small enough that the strap across his legs had slipped and his shin had a red line that would bruise. Mitch paused for one breath, then cut it and hauled the strap off. The boy clutched the metal bar with both hands. He fixed two eyes that were open too wide on Mitch and then on Emma. Emma nodded at him and said, "Two taps," and touched his shoulder twice. He copied the movement back at her. It was not a child's joke. It was proof of understanding.

738 Guards moved in with their arms doing what arms do when commands ride their ears. Vance entered the bay with two more. Her boots did not slip. Her haircut had clean edges. Her shoulder holster sat in a place that looked ornamental until you noticed the weight on her hip shift exactly the way it should when she turned. She took in the truck, the open straps, the cameras, Emma on the crates, Mitch with a pipe in his

hand now from somewhere near the pallet rack, and she built a frame for it without moving her mouth.

739 "Load what's viable now," she said to no one in particular and to everyone at once. She spoke into her radio without lowering her chin. The guard with the gun did not fire again. He looked to her for shape. She gave him none beyond the words.

740 Emma had climbed three feet up the crate stack to set her phone against the seam where the skylight met the beam. Signal here was not good. It was better than the floor. She thumbed a sequence she'd set earlier: bursts named like receipts, nothing to pull attention if someone looked for a second and then looked away. The first transfer hung two beats and then arrowed. She started the second. She did not hold the phone in front of her face because if someone hit her hand it would go. She braced the edge of it against wood and held it with the side of her palm.

741 Into the phone, she said, "ForestLife Pineridge hillside, lower research wing shipping bay. Dianne Vance, on site." She turned the camera enough to catch Vance in the frame. "Specimens tagged by neighborhood and trial. Crates stenciled EVERGREEN. Manifest header: Adaptive Physiology Trials. Example: NR-A thirty-four. Codes on camera. Date and time now." She named it without putting a day to the place where it could be cut off and dismissed later by a claiming hand that said it had been made earlier. She had learned that in the short time since this began. You don't give your enemy a lever they can throw with a sentence.

742 Mitch felt the floor change under his boots. It was not the forklift rolling over a seam. It was a regular push coming through the columns. Rotor wash from above made a pressure that you could feel in your teeth. The floor hummed for a fraction and then eased and then hummed again. He could not read the exact positions of the aircraft, but the envelope they owned over the building had settled.

743 Okafor's voice came through the bay not through his radio first but through the open dock seam and the baffles over the vents. The words were thin and tore a little around the edges, but they carried: "Get away from the hill. If you can walk, walk now. If you can carry, carry now. Move away from the hill."

744 Vance raised her radio. Her voice rode it calm. "Initiate sterilization sequence on my mark." She listened and then said three quiet words Mitch could not catch. The guard to her right put a hand to his earpiece and nodded once to air.

745 Emma's screen showed the last file's progress bar land. She backed the phone down from the beam and looked at Mitch.

746 "It's out," she said. She did not smile. She did not need to.

747 The change inside the building had a sound. Not a klaxon. A shift in duct flow and a knock under the ceiling tiles as air moved where air had not moved a minute before. The first drops hit the floor out of a head in the corner and spotted the dust. Outside, a sharp hiss vented from the roof and a thin white stream showed; people flinched and covered their mouths. The cleaner smell went hard and then got cut with acetic acid and heat, the sterilization sequence Vance had called in. Mitch dragged a bandanna out of his back pocket and got it up over his nose and mouth. It was a strip of shirtsleeve he had kept because people in his life kept strips of cloth. He put it on and kept moving. People who did not have anything put their forearms up over their mouths and breathed through the space between muscle and wrist bone.

748 Emma's breath hitched. The green under the scarf jumped. It lit a line along her jaw under the fabric like a pilot light that someone had turned up with a small valve. The mist clamped her chest; the green along her jaw deepened. She looked at the planter beyond the crate wall where a corporate designer had made a natural island under the roof seams. Soil rose within a steel frame. Two broadleaf plants, water-thirsty indoor types, had been allowed to live under a skylight for climate control tests,

or for brand. The soil at the edges had dried but not crusted. The mist collected and cut a line across it.

749 "It wants me to stay," she said. She did not say it to Mitch. She said it to the space in front of her mouth. It wasn't a question.

750 He moved to her. He had the pipe in his hand because it had been the right tool to grab when he had needed reach without weight. He put his free hand on her forearm and found that her skin was already damp where it met the scarf. The damp was not sweat. His fingers came away with a residue that was not water.

751 "Emma," he said.

752 She stepped to the planter corner. She knelt without wasting motion, set the duffel into the angle where steel met soil, and slid her right hand under the scarf. She put her palm against the soil. A damp loam smell cut through the acid. The soil took her hand without hesitation. A quiet suction marked where her fingers went in. Her wrist met the edge and then went past. The bark that had edged her neck had moved up the inside of her wrist without anyone needing to push it. For a second her jaw clenched against something that was not pain and not relief. She looked at Mitch. Her eyes were clean, even with the acid mist burning everything else.

753 "Stay with me in another way," she said.

754 "Don't," he said, once. It came out of him because it had to come out. He marked the loss and kept breathing. He saw the plan that led from this moment through the next hour, and the one he said didn't change the plan. He nodded. He bent and kissed her hair where it lay behind her ear and the scarf edge. The hair had dust in it and that dust had pollen and spray clinging to it because no one could keep the air out anymore. He turned and put his body between her and the pair of guards pushing toward them.

755 The first guard had a baton and the second had a taser he wasn't sure about because he'd seen what happened to a taser in someone else's

hands an hour earlier. Mitch didn't give him time to try his luck. He stepped in on the baton hand and brought the pipe across the wrist; the grip failed. The baton skittered. A glancing swing clipped his knuckles; skin split and stung. He turned into the second guard and drove the pipe under the taser wrist at the heel of the hand; the device hit the floor. He shouldered the man back.

756 Behind him, Emma's breathing stopped catching. It had been catching on the turn of each breath as if there was a burr inside her chest. It slipped into a smooth pattern. The green under her skin bloomed down her forearm in a way that had no need for a word from him. She was present and she wasn't going to stand up again.

757 "Down the east hall, now," came through Mitch's head. It carried her cadence without air and set a light pressure along his molars. It wasn't sound from outside. It wasn't his own thought dressed up. It had her shape without her mouth. His right palm had found the steel pillar that bolted the planter frame to the floor. The steel was cold. It had been welded to a plate that sat on concrete poured over the old soil. The soil carried the instruction.

758 He put his left hand on the pillar too and shut his mouth against any answer that would waste air. He let the pipe hang from his right hand and ran for the east hall. The sprinkler heads dumped a second wave. Ceiling panels began to sag where water added weight to fiber. One panel dropped and shattered; wet clumps fell against his shoulders and stuck. A beam above creaked; dust sifted over the planter edge. He ducked and kept moving.

759 He turned back once because he did not trust his own legs to keep the lane without the last image. Emma's hand lay in the soil to mid-forearm. Bark edged her wrist and the skin between her fingers had thinned and shown pale filaments bridging where nothing had bridged a day ago. Her face had gone easy. Not slack. Easy. She was not asleep. She was not gone. He put that in the place he would need it when the air went tight and got darker.

760 He hit the east hall at a run. The mist thickened where the duct work dumped and swirled. The chemical smell put a sting in the backs of his eyes. His strap bit, and he let it. The bite gave him a useful border. He counted in six, held one, out eight while the pull tried to scatter. His shoulder came up for a second and then did the thing he had taught it to do. Two shadows flashed ahead across the corridor where a half-closed fire door had been wedged open with a plastic crate. He vaulted the crate and did not look down at the pamphlets spilling from it with a tree and fish stamped green.

761 Boots and alarms and the steady hiss of the spray built a single field of noise. Under it he kept the other count going, the one that had nothing to do with machines. Tyler's face appeared in a doorway he had not planned for; the kid had somehow made the same turn and was marking the breath with his fingers. He pointed once to indicate clear. Then he disappeared again because that was how he kept himself from getting shot by accident by anyone.

762 Something changed in the weight of the floor. The line that marked the bulk of the building over ran to a load-bearing wall. He put his shoulder near it without touching, feeling with the space his body held. The building was pushing its chemistry into itself and it would not last long as a shape that could hold the kind of work the higher floors had been doing minutes ago. He knew that without a timeline from anyone.

763 He made the last turn by the exit sign. A figure in scrubs went to pull the bar on the stairwell door and Mitch cut across his angle so that the two didn't collide in a way that would leave them both on the floor. The man saw the pipe and the way Mitch held it. He stepped back instead of stepping in. Mitch took that given space and went through the stair door into a shaft that held warm air rising as if the mist itself made a draft.

764 Behind him, down the hall, another ceiling panel came down and failed to hit anyone because the hall had emptied two breaths earlier. He didn't let himself turn again because turning for images would kill him.

He moved under the curve of the stairs, then up two steps to reach the landing that opened toward the tunnel line again. The door there had a card reader that had already failed under moisture.

765 He put his shoulder to it, felt the hinges give a millimeter, then another. Drawing the pipe's end across the seam, he set it into the latch recess. It wasn't a pry bar and it didn't want to bite. He forced the latch. The steel bent a degree on the third shove. The latch gave on the fourth. The door came open into heat and cleaner air. The tunnel ran left and right, cold again and wrong with its own smells. "Left at the pump cage," came through with her cadence. He entered and listened for Tyler and for the two or three sets of steps that should follow if he'd done what he thought he had done for the group in the bay.

766 He did not hear Emma's steps because Emma wasn't walking. He heard her anyway, not in words this time. The line of his breath shifted one notch easier. He found the main without touching the wall. He put his knuckles to the concrete regardless. It steadied him. He ran.

767 From the bay, the new duct roar pushed through the dock seam toward the lot.

768 Outside, the hill took on the sound of aircraft holding a perimeter you could not see from the ground and the convoy at the base hesitated in the face of a carnivore that had broken pattern. Okafor stood in front of a truck whose driver still had his right foot where any training said to put it. She did not move. The driver did. He took the weight off the pedal. Residents crossed behind her, moving at a pace set by fear and by instruction. A guard shot a canister in a high arc that would have landed in the middle of them. A man with arms plated to the elbow, root filaments showing at his wrist, stepped into the arc. Resin on the plates blunted heat and irritant; he did not flinch when it cooked in his palm. He tossed it back at the road shoulder with the kind of motion you make when you set a hot pan down away from a child. The line of guards wavered, not because the canister came back, but because three of them had just watched a thing that did not fit any training they'd been given

and their bodies refused a plan that said they should throw another.

769 Two of Okafor's deputies lowered their rifles without looking at each other

Chapter 10

Clear-Cut

770 The booth hung over the bay like a fish tank built for humans, all angles and glare. Mitch saw Dianne Vance inside for one clean second between alarms. Her hand went to a red-handled lever, the kind you see in facilities where failure gets named and audited. She didn't hesitate. The handle came down. The blast doors in their tracks answered with metal-on-metal, a series of closeouts hammering across the wing. Rolling shutters dropped over the interior windows. A low thrum changed pitch in the ducts and then the ducts pushed a new load. The acetic bite that had begun as mist turned heavy and hot. The ceiling heads opened and did not stop.

771 He ran for the east hall because Emma had said east, and there wasn't any other lane that made sense. Panels in the ceiling went brown at their corners, took on water, and swelled until they gave. One broke open twenty feet ahead and dumped fiber clumps and a slow rain of grit that looked light and stung when it hit skin. The floor had gone slick with whatever the sprinklers were throwing. He used the wall with his shoulder and the pipe for balance and kept his right hand off the ground as long as he could, the gauze still gritty with planter soil. At the first turn, her voice cut through under the alarms without air to carry it. It pressed in along his teeth again.

772 "Left," Emma said.

773 He went left. Light strobed from a failing ballast somewhere and pushed every shadow into a series of stutters that made distance hard to count. Another drop hit the floor behind him hard enough to make a dull drum sound. Two doors down on the right a wired-glass window showed an office with a floating layer of paper and a metal chair on its side. His chest hitched on the inhale and he pulled two short breaths, long on the out, because that was the pattern that kept your feet under you when your lungs tried to lock.

774 "Crawl," she said. No pleading. Instruction. The air just above the floor held fewer droplets. He dropped to a knee and then a hand, the pipe along his forearm, and pushed forward, cheek close to tile. The chemical was stronger near the fixtures, thinner in the eddies by baseboards. It was a room-sized logic he could use.

775 He cleared the office and reached the next intersection. He got his head out past the jamb and looked both ways out of habit and saw he was already late to his own survival. The right-side hallway ceiling shifted a fraction and then something bigger than a panel let go overhead. An I-beam didn't fall; a lower support arm and a tied-in brace did, and it took the cheaper plenum structure with it. It came down on his left leg from hip to shin all at once. A white surge went through him, a fiber-shear shock with the load spiking and then collapsing into a hard ring. A sound came out before thought. The pipe clanged hard enough to throw a knife of noise down the hall.

776 He pulled; the weight answered with no. He shifted; his ankle threw a spark from a place no nerve had mapped.

777 "Stay with your count," Emma said. The words sat inside his mouth the way quiet sits in a tool room when the power is off. He couldn't tell if the whole sentence came at once or if time had gotten wide enough that pieces of it landed out of order and then made a line afterward.

778 In four. Hold two. Out six. The pattern ran against the heat on his throat and found room. He blinked away tears that were chemical, not

emotional. His palms found the floor. His right hand hit wrong and sent a shot up his arm and into his shoulder. The leather strap over the gauze bit down and gave him an edge to stand on inside his own body.

779 Option one was to lever. He reached back into the office on his right with the pipe and hooked the chair by its crossbar. He dragged it, got it under his chest, broke a leg off with a crack and a twist, and jammed that under the brace at an angle. He put everything he had into the lever and felt the wood give under his weight. The brace rose a quarter inch and then came back down and the chair leg split along grain with a dry pop. The building shifted again and answered to loads he couldn't see, not to him.

780 He saved his air. He pulled another two-short, one-long. He set his right hand down flat where the tile had cracked from an earlier drop. Something on the other side of the tile was colder than the hallway. Moisture had found a line and was running under the slab. He could feel it. A pressure gradient and a path of least resistance through fines and voids. The crack channeled it. The tips of something thin brushed his palm and then withdrew. Filaments. Not cable. Not wire.

781 His body over-learned the rule days ago: wood contact eased the burn. He spread his fingers over the fracture and pressed down. The cool reached his skin in a thread and made a straight line from palm to clavicle.

782 "If you want to stay," Emma said into his jaw, into his molars, into the spots where sound lives when you aren't hearing it from air, "let it take more."

783 He coughed and a laugh came off the cough because the line between those two sounds had been thin for twenty years and Don't was sometimes just How. His jaw set hard. "Okay," he said. He wasn't bargaining. He wouldn't get the old borders back. He got his weight off his wrist strap and let his right hand take the floor. He pressed until the tiny bones at the base of his fingers complained. The gauze darkened

where the crack cut under his palm. He pulled the strap with his teeth to get it out of the way and the leather tasted like sweat and cedar and the day he had first tied it on to hide the wrong color under his skin.

784 The point that had been living under the gauze for days stopped being a point. It pushed outward and flattened and then ran in three directions under his skin and down into the crack. The tissue between his palm and the tile changed. Cambium didn't belong there if you asked any book he'd ever opened. Books could be wrong when systems got pushed out of their lanes by a company that had named harm a trial. Growth cues, auxin and cytokinin from Howard's logs, aligned the change along a gradient he could track. He felt new bands lay down where skin would have quit. The pain sharpened to a hot bright that didn't stay in his hand. It ran his forearm to the elbow and nested in his shoulder for a breath and then dissolved into a steadier heat that didn't threaten to pull him apart.

785 The beam still had weight. The weight stopped feeling like a fist. It turned into a number he could hold in mind and counter with breath and pressure. His left foot carried pins of fire at the edge of the boot. His heel slid a thumb's width inside the boot and stopped. His calf said there would be bruises and something more than bruises if he didn't stop the load from getting worse.

786 The floor under his hand answered him. It wasn't language. The crack widened a hair when the building moved again and a set of white fibers reached his skin and held at the surface. They weren't nerve. They weren't wire. They were the same wrong-right thinness he'd seen at intake screens in raw water and in the ditch when Emma had poured the canister out. A cool line ran along his palm where those fibers met new tissue. The heat inside his chest stopped climbing.

787 He let his jaw unclench. He stopped the counting for two breaths to see if the count was carrying him or if he was carrying it. The difference mattered if he was going to keep more than one body intact inside himself long enough to do anything about the mess around him.

788 The alarms kept their tone. The ducts kept pushing. The building took on a deep sound that meant something heavy had given somewhere he couldn't see.

789 "Hold five seconds," Emma said. "Then exhale slower."

790 He held. The release didn't come out as a gasp. He owned it and let it go in a way that didn't cost him control.

791 Something in his hand that had been his and not-his settled into a single interface. The cambium laid itself down along the crack edge and connected to finer threads that were already under the slab, already running through fill and silted seams from the planter and the exterior contour. He could feel the way that set would respond to heat and dryness. It wasn't thought. It was a readiness.

792 He put his forehead to the floor next to his hand because the air was better there, and for a second he told himself it was simply to breathe and not to listen to whatever else the subfloor wanted from him.

793 He didn't have to move to practice the next thing. He let the next thing happen with his hand still on the tile.

794 Heat had been a number he measured with his skin since he was a kid standing too close to a tailpipe and not stepping back because the boys next to him didn't. Now it built itself out in front of him in bands. Reds and whites without metaphor ran down the hall, through a channel he had opened outside vision. He could put a boundary around one band and see the way the band would grow if he starved it or fed it water. Water moved in another medium. It wasn't a color. It ran in pulses and holds, and he could track those with the same part of him that had learned the mains by laying his palm on cedar.

795 Emma was one point you could pick out of a field full of points. She was also a pattern that held when he followed it into roots and out of soil to other places. If he pulled closer to her, the edges of every other thing sharpened. He treated it as equipment.

796 The beam on his leg pressed through the floor map as a shape. The cambium that had come through his palm thickened and didn't stop at skin. It went along the crack and into the subfloor grid and back toward his trapped calf. It followed existing paths and partitioned the weight in little steps the way experienced movers do when they slide a safe without being stupid about it. The pressure on his ankle dulled by degrees. Pain held a line at surgery-level but it stopped screaming and started reporting.

797 His breath clipped and fell out of sync; ribs missed once, and his fingers slid on grit.

798 Who am I?

799 His sense of where he ended blurred; the floor's grout lines ran where his ribs should be. His name wouldn't come.

800 The answer came without a sentence. Then a sentence arrived. Emma set the memory in front of him neat as a tool. His hand on the Douglas-fir post at the Caldwell porch the first night. The burn in his palm backing off when wood made a bridge for it. He had tried to call that coincidence and stupid. It hadn't been either. The bridge was here too. He wasn't less himself because another system had a way to carry him. He was more himself because the things he had been good at since he was a teenager were finally plugged into a circuit that wasn't using them to cut something down just to count.

801 Air moved through the duct overhead in bursts. The bursts lined up with the end of his long exhale. His ribs found the timing and held it. A pressure wave from the vents matched his long exhale.

802 Under the floor in ten different directions other presences ran at low volume. Tyler was the easiest to pick out. He had the kid's habit of

counting with his fingers because a grandmother had taught him that way and because fingers are available when your mouth is busy doing something else like not hyperventilating. Mitch caught Tyler's two-short, one-long on the edge of his own out-breath and let it mark a beat. He didn't say the kid's name because he didn't need to.

803 Something older moved through another root path out beyond the bay. The ring in the preserve. The circle's two-tap hello lived there, a quiet edge you could find if you went looking and then leave alone once you'd confirmed it still existed. They weren't gone. You could stop saying gone as if the English language had earned the right to define anything in the last week.

804 Okafor's words came to him through vent seams and through the skin of people who heard her and moved. "If you can walk, walk now." The phrase kept crossing the field at irregular intervals, riding bodies he could feel through their pressure against the ground and the shifts in weight when people turned toward the preserve instead of toward home. Home had been declared something else anyway by men with trucks and suits.

805 His left leg told him how numb it was going to get and how fast. His sense of his leg went small when he let his sense of the hallway expand. You couldn't hold it all. You had to pick. He picked the longer thing.

806 "There's a cooler seam two corridors over," Emma said, which in their shared space meant not just direction but a set of ducts and a section of slab not poured quite right two summers after the company had hired a crew that cut corners. He let the image of the seam settle in and then pushed at the damp the way he'd watched groundwater push through cracked soil in late August when someone had overwatered their damn lawn for a party.

807 He didn't yank on anything. He found a hold and he let go of another and the water moved toward the seam without him thinking he

had magic hands. Heat followed the humidity gradient and the convective flow he had set. The pocket he had been trapped in got less murderous. Air over his face didn't get clean. It got thin enough that his chest didn't have to work at the same stupid angle to draw oxygen through a blanket of acid and water.

808 A ceiling tile above his shoulder came down and tried to break itself across his back. Fibrous mud slid down his neck and into his collar. An exposed bit of flame tracked along an edge until it hit the wet green where cambium had spread and failed to take. Not invincible. Not immune. Delayed enough to buy seconds. Seconds stack. Seconds mean everything.

809 He checked the beam's new number and found it in a range he could hold without losing the breath count. The load hadn't gone away. The load had been shared across fibers and subfloor and the little ridges that had come up under his skin days ago. They did not feel alien. They felt like something the town had been doing under everyone's feet for a century with roots and culverts and the cheap repair of one neighbor telling another neighbor not to drive a three-quarter ton across the same soft patch twice.

810 "Hold," Emma said. He did. "Two taps forward," she added, and the instruction wasn't for his body. It was for the part of him that would need to show other bodies still in the wing which cracks ran where and which doors had warped in a way that a shoulder could still open them if you hit at the right place near the latch.

811 He put the instruction out the way he'd put out a hand in the gym and seen a dazed man's eyes register it and move. The signal didn't feel like telepathy. It felt like the ground at the hardware yard under rain when you and two other men lean into something heavy and all three of you make the same choice at the same time for the same reason. People shifted. Ducts thumped. Somewhere ahead, a hinge gave a short groan and clicked as a door pulled to, footsteps angling away. The building stayed up twenty more seconds.

812 He took those seconds and turned them into the next thing and then the next. Fine yellow grit settled along his knuckles and the tile, the same coat that would mark hoods and hats outside. Through the slab, brake pads rasped on a truck up the access road. Footfalls carried in a faint pattern past a set of double doors he couldn't see.

813 Outside, the hill changed shape in slices. The first section of the lower wing failed inward with a sound that people would call an explosion tomorrow if they needed a word short enough to fit into a phone call to someone who wasn't here. Sheriff Lynn Okafor didn't name it. She watched the roof edge drop and fold and counted people as they moved past the bumper of her cruiser and into the lane she held. She kept a rough rate, twenty through each minute when the lane held.

814 "Keep walking," she said, and she didn't yell it because yelling wastes sound. Her sleeve stuck to her forearm where blood had glued the fabric into a line. A drop broke free and tracked to her wrist. She ignored it. The crowd had a rhythm that would keep itself if nobody drove a truck into it. She kept the truck where it was by standing in front of it and not moving. The driver had already taken his foot off the pedal. He was too young to have earned that much doubt that fast and he had it anyway.

815 People used shirts and sleeves over their faces until the fabric went wet. A woman pulled the bottom of her dress up and used that instead. An old man pressed his mouth into the crook of his elbow and kept two kids behind him with one hand and his keys in the other as if keys could still open anything that mattered tonight.

816 The plume climbed and pushed down the road and across the lots. It dumped the lab's inside air into the houses and yards that had paid for the hill with property taxes and cancers and jobs. The chemical mix didn't match any field guide a fire crew would carry. It entered noses and eyes

and stayed. On a cruiser's mirror, a chalk-white film beaded and smeared when wiped with a sleeve.

817 Okafor scanned for two faces that weren't going to be in this lane. Habit fought knowledge for a second and then broke. Emma wouldn't be walking here again. Mitch, she forced herself not to finish that sentence with a lie or a certainty. She put him where he belonged for now in a list marked moving targets and swept her gaze back to the left where a man with bark along his wrists had paused to pick up a kid who had sat down on the curb and made the decision that people make when legs won't go a step farther.

818 Up the slope on the access road shoulder, Vance stood with two guards back and to the side. Binoculars hung from her neck. Her face didn't move. Okafor didn't waste time naming that face anything except practiced. When Vance thought nobody was looking, the hands that had pulled the lever in the booth shook once. It wasn't big. It was a short tremor that went through both wrists. Vance lowered her hands and it stopped. Okafor filed it under Costs and returned her eyes to the human line.

819 At the hill's base, anyone who looked could see the signs. Fine roots under sod near the curb had edged toward the road over years because irrigation along the shoulders had been free water when summers got tight. In that band, surface moisture dropped under the heat rolling ahead of the plume. The soil surface changed color for half a foot out and then went darker farther down as water moved deeper. Okafor had grown up standing on dirt and had never believed that ground was just background. She watched hairline damp spread along a contour and collect behind a rock the size of a child's fist. The rock had split one winter; the crack was a tiny channel now. Water followed any path available.

820 At the preserve edge the bigleaf maple and western redcedar crowns ran a signal. No wind came off the hill. The air had settled down into a heavy sheet. Still, the canopy along two hundred yards moved in a

set wave from west to east and then shut down. Under them, salal and sword fern held still. Leaves went quiet. The same pattern had run once during a heat event when spruce weevils had knocked out a strip and the older trees had made something like a break to stop a contagion that wasn't a contagion. She didn't need to frame that with an explanation to believe it. She let the fact sit where facts go and kept the line moving.

821 A deer limped across the ditch line, flank marked with roughened skin that wasn't scar tissue you get when a wire fence catches you. The animal stepped into alder shade, lowered itself, and lay with its head toward the hill the way prey animals do when they're too tired to run but still leave their bodies pointed at the thing that would come. Its ribs moved in a pattern that would let a vet say words about oxygen saturation. The rate steadied with each breath until it held.

822 In the sodium-vapor wash and headlight backscatter through smoke, the air showed a grain. You could see grains in it without trying. Pollen load had been up since sunset. Now it doubled into a density that wrote itself across black hood paint and along the brim of a hat when a man raised it to wipe his face. In under a minute, a thin coat marked any flat surface. Okafor didn't tilt her head up to get her eyes in it; she just noted the drift when a backlight lined it. Her jaw ached along the ridge where bark had been sliding in toward her ear the last two days. She pressed her tongue against the back of her teeth to reset her focus.

823 "Hold the lane," she said to a deputy who had lowered his rifle earlier and kept it lowered now. His eyes looked torn and then settled. He kept the lane.

824 Another slab of the lower wing failed. The noise rolled down the hill and hit the group in their legs. People flinched in their knees when sound hit bone, not because anyone ordered them to. A kid dropped a backpack and his sister picked it up without looking down.

825 Okafor kept counting: one, two, three. Numbers instead of prayers. The town had been changed in a day in front of everyone wearing

boots or sneakers or socks with a hole under the big toe. Changing back was not an option in the set she had learned her whole life. Changing forward was the only move that took.

826 Night had come early hours ago; smoke just made it heavier. The streetlamps had gone dead an hour ago when somebody had flipped a breaker up the line or a melt had sagged and snapped. Phones threw small squares into the air if anyone dared raise them. Okafor did not raise hers. She listened to the weight in the air and the numbers under her breath and gave two more people an open hand to move past.

827 She didn't look back up the hill. You only look back when there's something you can change by doing it. She held the shape of the human river until the river didn't need her to hold it anymore.

Chapter 11

Germination

828 The regional yard ran pre-dawn on generator light and procedure. Sodium lamps threw a flat field across pallets and rotor skids, across the printed diamonds on shrink-wrapped canisters lined in rows. The labels matched the ones she had seen at the water plant and in the school storage bay, scaled up for air. Push fittings sat in plastic bins by hose couplers. A ground crew checked bolts on cradle frames under a helicopter belly. The air tasted of dust, diesel, the faint sour sweet of a carrier compound that bled through seals when the night warmed a degree, and a faint acetic tang from last night's purge.

829 Vance kept her boots clean and her timetable cleaner. She moved between stacks and crews with a clipboard that held the only numbers that still mattered: nozzles, micron range, altitudes, windows. A contractor with a wind meter stopped her with a raised hand and a face that wanted permission to admit doubt.

830 "Inversion held last hour," he said. "If the wind shifts on the ridge, drift goes past target. We can wait twenty."

831 "You won't," she said. "Window K2 holds. Altitude ninety meters, two passes, offset pattern. If it shifts, you correct on pass two."

832 "Night air's uneven over the cut, ma'am. Droplets sit in the low and won't move off the creek."

833 "Then adjust flow to eighty. That's why you trained."

834 He closed his mouth on a set of words and nodded instead. Under her gaze, he swallowed and went back to his numbers. She moved on.

835 Inside the ops trailer, an old flat-screen in a corner ran with the sound off because she had ordered the sound off. The crawl didn't need audio. It spelled out the pieces she had tried to quarantine: Pineridge, leaked footage, detainees on gurneys with SPECIMEN tags, crates stenciled EVERGREEN, a woman on a crate stack reading codes into a phone. A still frame caught her face as a witness pointed and named her. The crew in here kept eyes anywhere but on the screen when she was in the doorway. The slow tape roll of a pedestal fan pushed warm air across map pins and printed wind roses and didn't improve anything.

836 She stepped out and recited windows to a crew chief over the thrum of a generator. "K2 and M5. Helicopter one up on K2, fix your spread. Two holds at idle until word. No unnecessary transmissions. Blackout across the block between windows. Any comms cross bleed will get you grounded."

837 "Blackout for safety?" the chief repeated out of habit.

838 "For safety." The words were precise. Safety contained everything she needed it to contain. Safety meant nobody in the yard would post a photo of the pod frames under a rotor mast. Safety meant the story stayed hers for the hour she needed it.

839 A junior tech at the nearest pallet was reading from a laminated checklist. He hesitated on droplet size and deposition rate. She stopped within arm's reach and he felt it, eyes still on the plastic page. He looked up. She didn't speak. He didn't either. His finger moved down the checklist and his mouth moved through the numbers he already knew. The pod cradle snapped into place with a metallic click that was too loud under the lamps.

840 Beyond the fence, one of the security lights wore a fresh coat of yellow. A guard had wiped it a minute before and smeared it into paste. Wind didn't carry this load away. It settled and then settled more. He reached up again and the coat renewed under his sleeve.

841 Her radio hissed. A voice from the southern perimeter said, "We've got a sag at the chain link where the culvert runs under. Something pushed up in the gravel. Crew on it."

842 "Hold it and report when fixed," she said.

843 Less than a minute later the west access called about a slow hazard on the roadbed. Another voice said a set of bollards had sunk a fraction at the gate, not a break, a nuisance. She listened for the pattern and found it. Nuisance timed in intervals you couldn't call coincidence. Spread work. You swat flies when you don't know there's a storm front.

844 She walked into the trailer, set the clipboard on a table, and signed the go-order. The pen shook once in her hand. She watched her own hand do it and made it stop. She let the point commit ink to paper and turned to the door before the staffer by the wall could read anything true into it.

845 She told the chief, "Launch on K2," and he ran to his crew at a controlled pace. The rotor mast began to rotate, slow at first and then quick enough that dirt lifted from the tarmac in a ring that caught grains of yellow hanging in the lamp field. The grains didn't move far. They came down on the skin of the pod housings and the backs of the men tightening straps, and then they held there.

846 By the time the sky lightened, he wasn't in a hallway. He did not wear one set of eyes anymore. He ran the map through contact and pressure and temperature. Moisture gradients and load lines told him where the morning would break and where it would hold.

847 Along a county road east of the yard, a median that had been baked into a trough for years lifted a dozen stiff shoots where a crack ran. The shoots had hardened overnight and filed themselves to points under stress. The first truck hit three at a shallow angle and lost a sidewall.

Rubber tore and flapped and the driver rolled to a stop in the only part of the lane where two more had positioned themselves to catch the second axle if panic turned into throttle. Panic did not. Hazard lights came on. A second truck braked, then a third. Radios chirped and produced more heat than problem-solving.

848 Within the fence of the regional yard, hoses that had been clean an hour ago wore a film inside they couldn't shake. Crewmen stripped lines, shook clamps, and cursed a slow clog you could not name if you didn't know cellulose. Threads drifted into screens and would not leave. A pump cavitated and then seized. Another ran dry long enough to fry a seal and strip a coupling. A man swung a mallet against housing and hit nothing that could be fixed with force.

849 In a neighborhood west of the hill, Tyler and two neighbors stood at a kitchen stove with a stockpot and a bucket of alder (*Alnus rubra*) bark that had sat in a garage for as long as anyone could remember. Tea bags went into a pot beside it because time was tight and polyphenols come from any store shelf when you need them. Plenty of houses knew the trick: tannins bind. The water went brown, the smell tannic. They poured the brew into a five-gallon and carried it to a ditch where a sheen rounded a bend. Tyler warned a boy back from the lip and tipped the liquid in against the flow, walking it along the margin to spread contact. The sheen wrinkled and went dull where the brown hit. Edges stopped running. The first lumps held where rock sat higher than silt. Tyler knelt and pushed a stick through a clot and watched it keep its shape. Neutralization wasn't a prayer. It was chemistry any family could do with bark and tea and five minutes of direction.

850 Emma's instruction ran through the field in clean words he didn't have to translate. Hold lines, not heads. The phrase sat exactly where his old reflex to hurt the hand that hurt you would have tried to stand. He took that reflex apart and laid it on the roadside with the gear somebody else had dropped. He sent a thin coat of water into an access corridor where five men with radios were walking. It wasn't enough to put anyone

on the ground. It was enough to add a half second to every foot placement. Half seconds multiplied. The schedule fell apart because friction and caution had joined the team and someone could call that an act of God in a briefing if they still needed a word that kept responsibility out of the room.

851 Okafor didn't use a word. She had a street plan. She gave a cousin a precise cross street and said her car would die there and so would his if he didn't find a better mechanic in the next hour. Hoods came up simultaneously at the choke point two blocks from a spur road the company had marked as private, and three more hoods rose in the next block to make any detour look worse than a wait. Radios said move the cars and nobody moved the cars. People offered jumper cables and then not quite the right clamp. Two deputies drifted near and then drifted away. It looked like the town had finally given in to its own tendency to break down at the worst possible moment. It was the best thing she had seen in days.

852 In the yard, a forklift drew a too-tight turn and grazed a pallet. A canister stenciled with the dead tree/fish symbol kissed the edge of the forks and a white line appeared where steel had taken off the first layer of paint. The line looked innocent until the tiniest amount of compound began to weep at the seam. A man shouted. Another went for absorbent that was too light for what was on the ground. The spill did not spread the way they planned for. Yellow grains in the yard air adhered everywhere the weep ran and formed a skin. Ditch fibers came in on a boot tread and didn't leave. In minutes, the floor of the spill went from shine to gel. A shovel cut through, lifted a loaf that held, then sagged. Crewmen swore into the backs of their hands because they were close together and the blackout order didn't allow them the relief of complaining into a channel.

853 Under the rotor mast, the pilot in the first bird raised a hand and then dropped it without finishing the signal. He looked at the yard and then at the board on his lap. He could fly a line over a hill, but he couldn't make the ground stop being itself.

854 The network hummed at a frequency that wasn't sound. His hand on a cedar flare near the cemetery didn't exist anymore in a singular way; the pressure maps told him where tension lived and where it could go if someone applied the right hold for a second and then let go. He moved humidity toward a lane by imagining a draw and then finding another point where he could give up a little without hurting anything soft on that side. The result was a slick that could have been a dewfall and a crew that put a foot down and then had to put it down again a safer way.

855 The first truck that had lost a sidewall had been joined by three more. A supervisor in a vest stood with a hand on his radio and no authority left to summon. He looked at the median and then at the trees that lined the road. A boy with pollen across his eyebrows looked back. The boy held a bicycle by the bars and did not smile.

856 "Hold lines, not heads," Emma said again into bone and root. He let the words run without resistance. The people in the yard weren't targets. The machines were. The schedule was.

857 Across the yard, Dianne Vance stood with her hands on her hips and watched the little failures add into a sum she couldn't carry across the next hour. Her crew chief walked toward her with a head tilt that meant a lot more information than the blackout allowed him to say. She lifted her radio and said the one thing left that still had any chance of working because it required nothing physical: "Stand by. Hold launch." Operational pause for public safety compliance. Shift to optics.

858 Within half a minute, the noise in the yard changed. The talk she had told them not to do began in low sentences at the edges of light. The gel on the tarmac held the shape it had taken, and the shovel sat in it, stuck enough that a man had to step down off the handle to get his weight back. The hoses stayed blocked even after covers came off strainers and screens went into a trash can that couldn't help anyone. From east and west and the ridge, thin water lines moved where they were told and then went still. The work would be there when someone needed it for something else. With crews watching their slick boots and the rotor

paused, he took the opening and walked toward the fence.

859 He moved through the ditch the way water does when it is invited. His body built itself where he needed it close to the fence: timber line to shoulder, bark extending in a band along his throat, fibers bridging between his right palm and the gravel underfoot. He picked a shape that read as a man because men with rifles looked for that shape. They looked away from trees unless the trees moved wrong. He tested his weight and found the holds that put no strain on anything that would have to carry more later.

860 Two guards saw him in the same second and both stepped back with muzzles rising and then stopping in the air between options. One had a youth's skin that should have been at a job that did not require calculation about whether to shoot a neighbor. The other had a mouth set in a line that had learned to follow orders because the line on his mortgage did not allow him the alternative.

861 Vance came to the fence. She did not raise her voice. She held her hands low. She looked at his throat and at his hand and at the way his boot heels hung in the gravel as if his weight had opinions of its own. Her jaw set. Then she gave it words.

862 "A man who quit on himself," she said. The words could have been entered into a chart.

863 "You can't burn a root that's in the rain," he said. He did not add the parts she already knew eviscerated her plan: roots under roads, under medians, under lawns that were always too wet in August because people didn't know how to talk to a hose. The rain he meant was any water that did not require her permission.

864 She turned her head a fraction. "Take the shot." The older guard tightened his grip. The younger lowered his rifle until the barrel pointed

at rock and not at a chest. Vance saw both motions and made no new sound.

865 "You are trespassing," she said to an altered man who stood on a county right-of-way.

866 "You already know what trespass looks like," he said. "If you've got eyes, look up in a minute."

867 She gave a dry sound that would have been a laugh if air and throat had been younger. "Trees do not write," she said.

868 "You're standing under a line of it." He didn't need to convince her. He had work to do that had nothing to do with her seeing it first.

869 The light under the crowns beyond the fence changed in bands. It wasn't magic. Rows of leaves presented their darker sides along a line. Strips went matte and then bright in an order you could measure. The lines intersected at angles that didn't belong to wind. The first bar finished and a second bar started where a letter would need a second stroke.

870 Vance lifted her radio and got noise. Another voice came in on top of it and said, "Public Affairs: hold for optics," and another said proceed to fallback and a third said do not engage. The only thing that had ever made any of these systems work was the absence of conflict between orders. She had that absence yesterday. She did not have it now.

871 Her mouth moved without the rest of her head making a choice about it. "It was supposed to be controllable," she said, and the sentence reached him at the same level her orders had reached him inside the shipping bay on the hill.

872 He felt a weight in his chest that had nothing to do with any beam or slab. Pity tightened his chest. He wouldn't use it. He kept the field in his hands and his throat dry enough to speak one more time if the air allowed it. The guards kept their rifles where they were, not raised, not resting. The patterns over the fence finished the first letter and began a

second. Across fibers and water seams, he stayed with the ridge too.

873 Okafor stood at the ridge in early light, where you could see the line of the old trees and the lot where vans had been. She let her jaw hang a fraction to ease the ache where bark had been edging up for two days. The air carried less acid and more resin than last night. People stood without speaking because speaking would have poured something thin into a moment that had mass.

874 The crowns darkened and brightened on a schedule no wind wrote. Lines built where you would expect lines if you had learned to read in any school in the county. The first word finished on a strip two hundred yards long, each letter held by a set of leaves that had turned their darker sides outward or shut down glare in a band. DO. The next word took longer because the geometry had more strokes. NOT. A murmur went through the group and did not become noise. Someone whispered, "It's spelling." The last word took up more of the slope than the first two. BURN. The bark along her jaw ticked once and settled.

875 A helicopter eased in from the north and began a circle, held its altitude, and then veered. The scanner in a deputy's hand caught a voice from the cockpit that did not wait for permission to speak. "Negative." No other detail. No argument. The machine obeyed the human inside it because that is how machines still work.

876 Down the slope, a news truck had found gas somewhere and a mast went up with a camera on it. The screen on the side showed the same words the trees held and, in a split box, Emma's face from the shipping bay above text that had run all night. The sound of the broadcast came thin against the ridge and then disappeared in the air. The image held. A woman standing near the camera wiped pollen off her phone and held it up high enough to catch two sets of proof in one shot, the bay

footage on a borrowed screen and the ridge words on the world. Nobody could call that doctored without lying.

877 Okafor saw Vance under the yard lights because she knew what to look for. The woman tilted her face up and kept it there. A phone in her pocket vibrated once, then again. She did not pull it out. Her index finger twitched against the radio casing. There is no script for standing under a sentence that tells you the one thing your plan needs you to ignore.

878 Tyler stood three bodies to Okafor's left with both hands crushed into the hem of his hoodie. Tears came and he grinned in a way that confused his own mouth. He had learned to hold two truths at once in one face and he did it now without ceremony. Okafor let her shoulders drop a margin and stayed dropped. Nobody had won. Nobody had died in the last hour who did not have to. For this morning that was what the word relief meant.

879 Across the contact points under her boots, the network moved a signal you could call joy if you needed a human word for it, and another word that belonged to bodies that had worked all night and paid for it in sugars and water and the kinds of tissue changes you only get away with when you are new to a form. Mitch rode the roll of it across his chest and into his palms wherever they were, felt a small pressure drop behind his eyes, and then let it go because holding it would have been a mistake.

880 A pin rain started across the ridge under a clean patch of sky; the crowns let go what they'd been holding, a minute of throughfall, then it stopped. Leaves took the water back and the dust let go of its own grip on itself. Kids lifted faces and flinched when drops hit eyes and then laughed because pain did not come with the water.

881 The radio that had been naming schedules at the yard went quiet. After a minute it said, "Stand down on K2 and M5," with no reason attached, and people passed the line along in low voices while the trucks on the access road stayed put, waiting for orders that did not come. The pause made room for what was going to happen next.

882 Okafor did not take a victory lap. She looked at the people in front of her and at the town behind them and at the lane she would have to hold again when the next flow started. She stayed where she was until the words in the crowns lifted back to their resting states and the ridge looked like a ridge again. The pollen stayed where it was without apology.

Chapter 12

Succession

883 The fence cut the hillside in a straight strip of scraped soil. Chain-link rose to a height that shrugged off easy climbs, topped with new razor wire that still shone. Mid-run, one panel still held a shallow bend from the sugar pine lean last winter. Radiation-yellow rectangles repeated along the run with black symbols and a warning that did not name what lived here. At midafternoon the metal was warm and the posts carried a low vibration from vehicles idling two turnouts away. Dates stenciled on the post bases showed the spring install; a strand of caution tape on a tie had gone colorless and cracked. Beyond the mesh, the ground was ordered where it had not been ordered before.

884 He knew the order in his bones now. It wasn't a metaphor. His bones were part of the order. Water that used to slip under town in loose sheets moved through lanes he helped hold. On the near slope, alternating panels of alder and grass set at exact distances patterned a square that closed against wind from the canyon and then opened. Behind that, cedar juveniles stood in short rows that bent at equal intervals and settled. Spirals that had begun as clumsy swirls a season ago tightened to readable turns. The whole slope carried geometry you could count without lifting a finger.

885 A boy picked pebbles from the ditch gravel and clicked them against the fence. He was twelve or thirteen and had an ear cuff that glinted. He stopped when a soldier at the corner post called, and he stopped because he didn't need another fight today, not because the soldier mattered. Two women stood closer to the nearest placard. One had a scarf wrapped against the dust even though the air was mild. The

other wore a shirt with sleeves rolled that showed a faint bark edge across the wrist bones. They passed a phone between them and then held the phone down.

886 “They say Mr. Hanley’s up past the old pumphouse,” one said.

887 “Past it, yes,” the other said. “West side of the bowl.”

888 “You can see it?”

889 “You can feel it,” the woman with the scarf said. She put her fingers through the fence and tapped twice on the post. There was a pause and then the tips of alder leaves along a line lifted as a group and returned. She kept her hand on the wire until her forearm steadied.

890 It was late summer a year after the hill fell in on itself. The ground had kept count. Ash lay in thin drifts against old thresholds and slab edges. It wasn’t inert. It fed what came next. Calcium went into solution with the first rains so shoots stood straighter; potassium moved to the new cambium and thickened growth; pH ticked up so seed coats opened instead of rotting, and forearms steadied faster at the fence. On one square of blackened concrete, twenty-four Douglas-fir seedlings held the same height and the same interval from one another. Alder stood by to fix nitrogen. Rhizobia did the basic work under a dusting of pollen grains that had never left since that week in the fall when the air went yellow and then went back to clear.

891 He kept the ash in his head as a map and kept the pH in his skin the way you keep a rhythm while you drive. He had driven trucks that carried the last old boards out of this town. He had cut trees he should never have touched. He did not build a prayer around it now. He held load and water and let the numbers move through him.

892 At the turnout two white trucks idled with fresh decals that said National Guard and carried a state name under the emblem. Sandbags had sunk a fraction into the gravel in front of the little tower. Two soldiers sat under the light mast with their backs to a galvanized bin of salt that nobody needed this month. One of them smoked a half cigarette and

handed the lit paper to the other. The second man took it and drew in a way that said he had skipped a meal. He watched the crowns. The bore of his rifle faced down because there was no reason to point it at anything solid.

893 The plaque at the turnout had gone up in spring. Stainless steel with laser-cut letters bolted to treated posts. It used phrases that removed people from their own bodies. Incident dates instead of a list of names. It said facility event, then it said community impact. It did not say who opened a valve or who closed a door. Kids came out here and read it once, and after that they stopped reading. By August the plate was spotted with small marks where spit hit and dried cloudy, then hit again and ran. Beside it, a laminated notice with stamped seals listed a Family Window schedule; black tape crossed the times and two signatures sat at the bottom. Zone remains closed under a state, federal memorandum; the Family Window is suspended.

894 He felt those hits. They landed as small cool circles and slid. The plate itself held heat and spread it into the posts, and the posts dumped it to the ground through two feet of tamped gravel. Gravel took heat well. He turned a small band of water under the footing to keep it from crossing a threshold that would crack the post at the base in the first frost. It was not an act of mercy. It was maintenance for a system that had to carry messages he did not get to choose.

895 A guard turned sideways in the camp chair and thumped his radio. "Post Two. Ten-eight." He put his foot on the rung and leaned back. He turned his head and spat into the dust with the ease of someone who had done the same motion for years. The spray dispersed before it reached any living root. His partner looked up at the crowns, squinted, and took another draw. "Smells like turpentine," he said. He didn't sound angry. He sounded tired. "Better than that other shit," he added, and pointed with his chin at the town side where people still wiped chalk-white films off their mirrors after some mornings.

896 It was better. The terpene load was not a fantasy. Monoterpenes rose on dry afternoons and carried on the air. Pinene, mostly. The load rose in the first fifty yards then dropped past the third reflector post; dust thinned by the third reflector, and coughs did too. People who walked to the fence coughed less and held their shoulders lower when they went back to their cars. They did not put that on a form. No form asked them.

897 Three bees worked a spray of fireweed that had taken a shallow dip in an old rut beside the turnout. A line of ants carried one direction with dried sap and the other with some insect six times their weight. In the ditch, caddis husks lay where runoff had gone hard after a single storm and then stayed away. The ditch would carry again when the season turned. He had prepared the skin of it by holding a thin sheath of water under the silt where sun couldn't pull it all the way out. That swipe didn't cost anything; it bought a minute of life for the next run.

898 Two women came with a man in a mechanic's shirt and stood where the mesh was less patched. The man kept one hand against the wire and let it buzz his palm when cars went by. He didn't pull away from the discomfort. "Angela," he said to the trees. He said the name once. He waited. Alder off to the left lifted three small panels in sequence and settled. He nodded and smiled one time and then set his jaw again. "She's not in pain," the scarfed woman said. She spoke for herself and also because the man had not asked for words. She let the mesh cool her skin. "It aches," she said. "It aches everywhere. But not the way it did." The man breathed out. He took his hand back and wiped it on his jeans.

899 In the far part of what they still called town, a mower hesitated in a back yard where grass didn't need cutting. The engine note rose and fell without extra load. He had only ever learned to mow.

900 He checked his left leg. It no longer belonged to a singular him. It closed a loop from the old brace fall to this afternoon's crow step on a log. It carried half a percent more sap flow than last week. The scar that had become more than scar in the east hall mapped cleanly into storage pockets under a cedar root not forty yards from where the fence cut the

ground. The storage shifted over twenty seconds as shade left a patch and a thin breeze reached needles that had not moved all day. He was there when it moved. He was also under the slab by the old water plant where a concrete crack he had touched when he was still a man marked a fault that wouldn't start trouble until the first freeze. He held it in memory and would check again when the number of cold nights reached three.

901 A teenager swung his leg across a bicycle, skidded his back tire on gravel, and coasted to the plaque. He read nothing. He pulled a marker from his pocket, uncapped it with his teeth, and wrote four figures along the lower rim. Not letters. Trees, blocky, a rectangle for a trunk and triangles for crowns. He didn't finish the last crown. The soldier who had stopped the pebble kid an hour ago didn't stand. He let the kid draw. The younger man with the cigarette saw the drawing and let a breath out that wasn't about smoke at all. He stood up slow, stepped away from the chair, and ground the butt under his boot even though gravel didn't need grinding.

902 On his run under the fence, moisture thickened and thinned in corrugations. The air pooled against the cold iron and then slithered under in ribbons that were visible only to anyone who had learned to read with their skin. He read it with his whole surface. He was not a ghost. He was not a god. The numbers didn't need a god. They needed breath and contact and the willingness to carry pain and not lay it down.

903 The woman with the scarf pointed once to the ridge. "Dusk," she said. The man nodded. They waited. People at the turnout fell quiet because every night now this was the moment when anyone who wanted to speak to anyone inside stood still and watched. The sun had no more to do here. The crowns took over.

904 The order moved from left to right and then jumped to another line. Broadleaf faces rolled to ten degrees, then twenty, then back to seven. They did not wave. They performed a sequence. Panels went dark and light by band. Diamonds formed in a stone wall pattern across a span you could walk in five minutes, laid out in quilt squares, and then the

diamonds alternated in a block that referred to a point on a paper map in a county office that still kept rolls of plans for the creek culverts.

905 She was inside that pattern. Emma did not sit with her back to a planter anymore. She was wood and leaf and unseen cells and she was also the same person who had labeled vials at the kitchen table with dates and times and codes that made truth hold even for people who didn't want it. He felt her cadence as changes in throughfall rate and contact potential on a slope of bark that had registered human handprints when the crews first came with buckets of gel and pressure wands. She moved panels the way she had moved herself through a room under stress. Cleanly. Purpose first. No flourish. The pattern said what it had to say. It didn't spell this time. It declared a map: safe, not safe, move, wait, hold.

906 Along the fence, phones rose and then lowered. People had learned the schedule of signals from Sheriff Okafor who told them that sometimes the pattern told them stop and sometimes it told them go, and if you reversed those you could get people killed. The sheriff still wore a uniform that didn't match anything on national news. She worked the county that had not changed its lines since the mill first put paid hours on the wall in the break room.

907 The soldier at the corner post turned his head and watched the geometry without calling his partner. He could feel his own jaw where a roughness had been trying to come through for months, a thin stripe along the angle below the ear. He reached up and tested it with his thumb and stopped because there was no use in worrying it to blood. He kept his eyes on the hill. He wasn't sure who he wanted to win. The job did not include the word win.

908 The plaque held the last of the day's heat and then released it as the air went gray. Spit dried. The ant line reversed. The fireweed hung its cups tight. The resin note on the air got stronger for a moment and then settled into a clean scent that used to live in logging roads at dawn and hadn't for a while. A car door shut. A kid said, "Tomorrow." Nobody answered him. You didn't need an answer for that.

909 Two hundred miles away, the hearing ran on screens.

910 The television had no sound at her table. There was too much noise from the row of sets above the bar, and the tendons in her neck were loud enough to carry without help from speakers. The lights were low and flat. The staff had turned down the house feed after one old man in windbreaker and slacks told them he would walk if they didn't let him hear the part where people in uniform said the word that everyone outside this room had known for weeks.

911 On the big feed above the bar, a committee room was washed in white light. Flags sat in stands behind a row of chairs. A woman in a gray blazer asked a question she had asked once already. Dianne noted the repeat and the funneling; the second asking narrowed it to yes or no. The second time she said it, she showed a still on a screen. She led with a still; that move trapped the answer. The still showed stainless steel tables with drains, articulating light arms, a foot-pedal sink. The movement behind the still was the kind of movement a man makes when he wants to scratch a rash under his wristband but doesn't dare. A banner at the bottom of the screen kept a blue bar moving so you never forgot the network was live.

912 Emma's footage came up in a window that took the left half of the screen. A lower-third read Source: Caldwell Archive. Shipping bay. EVERGREEN stencils. A manifest with the words Adaptive Physiology Trials in bold. The woman in the gray blazer said, "Identify the program you call Evergreen." The man in a suit four seats down said the words he had been trained to say without moving his lips in a way that could be read. "I cannot confirm or deny, " and the chairwoman cut him with a "Spare it." The camera ditched him and put the colonel in full frame. Clean cut; the producer took the frame before he could run the clock.

913 Dianne watched the colonel's hands. They were steady. He looked like every career photograph of his type. He was not special. He was not

cruel. He was a system standing up in cloth. He paused a fraction before the verb; it read as pre-cleared. “Evergreen exists,” he said, and the room gave one combined sound that wasn’t a gasping sound. It was the sound of people deciding whether they had to work harder at pretending. The chair rapped once; counsel asked for a brief recess. She tracked the row behind him: mouths thinned, eyes went to notes, posture shifted from show to math.

914 He spoke three more sentences and sat down inside his frame in a way that kept him from falling off the world. She had taught herself that skill years ago. She had learned to sit on the worst day of someone else’s life and speak about mitigation and continuity until they stopped looking at her and started looking at the centerfold of their own grief. She had told the pilot to hold launch, then to stand down, then she had crossed the yard to a fence and told a man he had quit on himself. A kid had lowered his muzzle in front of her; the older man behind him had kept his grip.

915 Her own table’s screen showed what the program editor wanted people in a bar to see. It put up a split between the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and a tract in Pará, Brazil. A lower-third read: Two other sites confirmed , Upper Peninsula, MI; Pará, Brazil. On one panel the words DO NOT BURN had been visible last week. Tonight, squares blinked in and out where the slope dropped steep, a code people had learned in a week when grief ran high. On the other panel, the crowns shifted into written words in Portuguese. The anchor spoke about synchronous phenomena and showed a third frame for a moment that held only a home back yard and a maple with one child standing with both hands pressed to the bark. The child’s mouth moved on a four-count, held, then moved again. The anchor asked an expert about cost while the image showed a small body whose chest and shoulder blades were doing the work they were built to do.

916 A pundit raised his hand and broke into the host’s line with the word miracle. The producer cut him two syllables later and a graphic

popped with the words ECONOMIC IMPACT and ENERGY PRICES. The panel nodded their heads with the gravitas that paid them rent. The anchor pivoted cleanly.

917 Dianne reached for the remote and killed the screen at her table. The bar's sound ran on, a low wash of vowels and the scraped bell of silverware. In the window, her own face held with the lights from the set making masks on the glass. She set the remote on the table, face light, and watched her hand lift away. It was steady. The picture outside the glass was a three-story parking structure and the reflection of the bar. In the shape of the window, she stood in a building that she did not own. Her shoulders showed the shape of a suit that had worked for her in rooms where people loved suits. This room did not love suits.

918 She put cash under the coaster and stood. Her phone screen flashed "Legal, HQ" beside the coaster. She let it ring out and held her breath to a slow four. Her neck sounded loud when she turned her head toward the door. She walked out into air that carried nothing but exhaust and the trace of a grease trap from the alley. No resin. No acetic sting. No bleach. She had built a life out of making messes disappear. The mess did not belong to her anymore. It didn't belong to anyone.

919 She did not look up at the sky when a rotor blew a circle over a different city with a different conflict. She walked to the elevator and pressed the button with a thumb pad that didn't catch at anything. The door closed and gave her back her face in steel. The line of her mouth was straight and uninteresting. She had once been told her calm would make a fire go out. That had been false. Fires did not care. Calm was something you could put in a room while other people burned.

920 The elevator stopped on her floor. She walked out and used the key card. The light went green. The lock clicked open. She exhaled a measure she had been keeping since the colonel's sentence. She went inside and did not turn on the light.

921 Later that night, back at the fence,

922 Lily had ridden the route a dozen times on mornings when the air still hurt and six times after dinner since it got better. The guards changed every four hours. The man in the bad boots scraped pebbles back and forth under the chair without knowing he was doing it. The woman with the dark hair and the low voice liked to stand up and stretch out her calves at the top of every hour. The asphalt patch by the reflector settled a new fraction every week. The chain-link panel where the old sugar pine had leaned in the winter had a bend you could see if you put your eye on the plane of it. She crouched in scrub across the road and watched until the voices drifted and one man laughed at a joke he couldn't repeat at home. She waited for a truck to come past so she didn't have to be the only moving thing.

923 She slid. It took one breath. She went sideways through the bend and turned her shoulder to save skin. The wire caught her shirt and let it go. She stood still on the inside with her back to the fence and her head low. She counted in and out until her heart didn't throw her breath back and make it ragged. She put both hands down at her sides and opened them.

924 The ground carried a hum that lived in a floor in the old high school when the air handler was on and lived in a different way in the log deck when the loader idled for too long. This hum wasn't machine. It was not music either. It was a pattern you could stand inside. It rolled under her arches and pressed into her palms. It reached her arms and sat there as something warm that was not heat. She did not have language for it. She did not look for language. She stood with her hands open and kept her mouth closed and let her tongue rest in the bottom of her mouth so it didn't try to add words it didn't need.

925 "Uncle," she said. Her voice sat low in her throat so it didn't carry. She didn't need it to carry. A set of leaves ten feet ahead of her lifted in three small steps and lay down. Then another set answered on the other side of the game trail. She smiled because she had wanted this since the

night the words in the crowns told everyone something simple and not enough. She wanted more than a sign with letters. She wanted to ask if dinner should be stew or pancakes and hear a smart remark in return and then argue about it because that was how they used to keep each other alive.

926 The ferns ahead of her angled outward. It was not wind. The petioles had taken water a margin ago and could spend it now on a controlled change. Space opened an inch, then two, then fully the width of her foot. She stepped where the space asked her to step. Once, kittens had done that to her in a neighbor's garage, leaving a space only big enough for her hand and then making sure she used the space properly. This was not kittens. It was ferns that had learned a trick for moving without getting ripped by things too fast to avoid. She went forward and the plant ahead of her moved again and let her knee pass without a scratch.

927 At the bowl, she stopped. This was the place. The oldest trees made a circle, not perfect but close. People she had known all her life had stopped standing and kept breathing here. Only, they had stopped standing in the way adults meant standing, on feet. They stood in roots and held.

928 She went to the ground and put both hands flat. The soil had heat in it from the day and it had its own heat from what lived. Her fingers sank a little and then stopped against a mat that didn't want to be broken. She didn't press harder. She left her hands where they sat. Her breath went in. It held. It went out. She did it again and again until everything that had been shaking stopped shaking. The heat climbed up her arms and into the spaces above her elbows where she had bruised herself last week when she tripped over the garden border because she was trying to read a map at the same time she watered the beans.

929 Things came with the heat and they weren't pictures, not in the way the phone did it. The Douglas-fir post at the Caldwell porch came to her with ribs under her fingers. The feel of sanded grain. She knew she

was small in that memory because the post was bigger than it had been lately. The stainless table in the school storage room had a lip that dug into her forearm as she leaned to cut a tie with a cheap pair of scissors she had stolen from the art room when nobody was looking. The scarf that Emma had worn for months lay under that memory with the particular smell of sweat and damp cloth and a resin she had never smelled before but would always know now. The old hammer with the split handle sat on the workbench and the broken piece bit her palm where she grabbed it wrong the last time she'd gone in without permission.

930 She didn't pull away. If she pulled away she knew it would stop and she would feel like she had stolen something and then dropped it in a river where you couldn't get it back. She kept her hands in and let her back get sore. She swallowed once. She didn't cry. She listened for the part of Uncle that used to swear under his breath when he saw somebody reverse a truck with the wheels turned at the wrong time. The breath in the ground answered instead with a push she could not translate. It did not include cuss words. It included steadiness. That was better, and not as funny, and she accepted the trade.

931 On the perimeter, somebody shouted. The sound arrived small. It struck leaves that were built to catch what they needed and give what they could not keep. Air moved through layered spaces and made nothing louder than it had to. The shout flipped and went into the hill and came back thinner and then not at all. She let the sound go because the person who had made it had made it to be heard by somebody who was not her.

932 Ahead of her, at a height just over her head, two branches lifted and made space. A bird landed on a twig and then took off without bouncing it. From above came a dry, soft sound. A single winged seed spun down with no wind to help it and drifted straight into her open palm. She put it in her pocket without looking up, because looking up at everything all the time was how you missed what was under your hands.

933 "Emma," she said, and the heat under her left hand rose a fraction and then smoothed back down. A light-and-shadow pulse crossed her

knuckles once in a way that matched the timing of her breath. She lifted her head and the ferns didn't hit her face. She kept both hands planted because nobody had told her that kneeling in the dirt in this place counted as anything but what it was. She sniffed and the air in her nose was clean and green and another thing that didn't need a word in order to matter.

934 She lowered her head again. "I'm listening," she said. She stayed where she was. She made herself quiet enough for something older than her to answer without having to shout.

935 The answer came with no syllables. The crowns ahead of her moved a width and then a width again and then rest. Behind that movement was another movement under the ground. Somewhere close by, water left a shallow storage pocket, moved a short distance to the right, and sat with more of itself against a root that had asked for more because the night was going to be the kind of night where another degree of cold might crack something that still needed to hold.

936 Her knees hurt. She didn't move. She thought about the seed in her pocket and the place in the yard where she had dug last week to see if the beans had pushed. She would not tell anyone the exact place she had come through. Not yet. She could tell the sheriff that she had been inside and the sheriff would know what to do with that and what not to do.

937 A deer moved in the stand to her right with a limp in the rear leg that didn't stop it from stepping through a space only a fist wide. She breathed again and the count moved to a six in, one hold, and eight out without her deciding to change it. It fit better. The ground under her thumbs warmed a quarter degree. She didn't know that number. She knew the feel. She kept her hands where they were and let the night finish coming in.