

TRAILMARKED

Granite & Thunder

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1

Launch Along the Water

Morning did not rush the meadow. It arrived with a dry, honeyed light that settled into the cured stalks of the grass, slowly lifting the thin ribbons of mist from the creek. The air held the lingering scent of sun-baked pine and dry earth, though the night's high-altitude chill still clung to the shadows. Fine beads of dew sparkled on the grass, a fleeting moisture that would be gone before the sun cleared the ridges. Somewhere beyond the willow line, a raven called once, its voice steady and low.

Jonah lay on his back, one arm folded behind his head. Sunlight filtered through the tent mesh, turning the fabric a faint, translucent green. Pine shadows shifted whenever the wind moved through the higher branches, tracing dark, serrated patterns across his sleeping bag. The creek ran steady beyond the meadow, a bright ribbon of sound threading through the morning.

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He rolled onto one elbow and peered through the tent flap, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the horizon for the first sign of weather. No clouds. He waited, searching the gaps between the high granite ridges with a ranger's eye. He wasn't scanning for the blue, but for the subtle vertical build of a storm masking its anvil behind the peaks. Still none. He let out a quiet breath that puffed white in the chill air.

"Clean," he whispered, more observation than celebration.

From the other side of the nylon wall, the familiar sounds of camp began to organize the morning. He heard the low murmur of adult voices, the rhythmic clink of metal cups against stone, and the sharp hiss of a stove settling into a steady burn. The mechanical percussion of the gear was as much a part of the morning as the birds, the sound of people who lived by the rhythm of the trail. Coffee was the first gear check of the day.

Jonah unzipped the tent and stepped into the grass, the cold shooting instantly through his wool socks. He reached for his two-liter reservoir, his fingers finding the familiar bite of the plastic closure without looking. It wasn't a skill he'd practiced in a workshop; it was muscle memory earned at a hundred different campsites where the light had failed long before the work was done. He headed toward the creek to camel-up, his stride already adjusting to the uneven meadow floor. He wasn't stiff, but he felt the weight of the day. His heart did a slow, steady trot against his ribs, paced by the maps he'd already memorized.

“Still no clouds?” Eli called. He was already at the bank, his head tilted as he performed a technical scan of the western horizon.

Jonah checked the gaps between the granite ribs one last time. “Empty sky,” he reported, matching Eli’s intensity. “What’s the barometric pressure in your gut saying, storm prophet?”

Eli snorted, appearing from behind a cluster of alders. He was barefoot, carrying his boots in one hand, his pant legs rolled up to mid-calf and dripping. He had that faraway look he got when he was already analyzing the day, his mind likely logging water levels and wind speed before he’d even had breakfast. “Last time you said that, we got soaked before lunch,” Eli said.

“That was one time,” Jonah said.

“Three,” Deb said, her voice coming from the cooking rock.

Jonah turned to see her sitting cross-legged on a flat stone, her hair already pulled back and her boots laced tight. Her pack lay open in front of her like a puzzle she had solved before the sun was up. She wasn’t fussing over the gear; she was fine-tuning it. Sleeping pad rolled tight, frame centered, side straps even. Nothing decorative or loose. Everything she carried had a specific, practiced purpose.

“You’re supposed to be on my side,” Jonah said, pointing a finger at her.

"I'm on the side of dry socks," Deb said, giving a side strap one final, authoritative tug.

Jonah reached for his fleece, the fabric smelling of woodsmoke and the cedar branch he'd used as a pillow prop the night before. He watched his parents near the stove. His father, a man who had spent twenty years as a backcountry ranger, was moving with a quiet, efficient grace, his hands moving over the breakfast prep with the same care he used when checking a topographical map. His mother was nearby, stirring a pot of oats, her expression calm but observant.

There was a weight to the morning that Jonah hadn't felt on their previous trips. Usually, this was the moment where his dad would start a briefing, laying out the route and the contingency plans. Today, his father didn't check Jonah's cinch or quiz him on the bear-bag hang. He just handed him an enamel mug, the metal biting cold into Jonah's palm, and nodded toward the high ridges. The message was clear. The adults had spent years teaching them the skills. Now the three of them were responsible for using them well.

"Flow's lower than last week," Eli said, sitting on a log to dry his feet. "The crossing at the braid should be a non-issue if the granite isn't filmed over."

Jonah followed Eli's gaze to the creek. It cut along the meadow's edge, bright and narrow, weaving around granite ribs. It moved as if it had been doing the same thing forever and saw no reason to change.

Eli grinned mischievously. "Maybe don't disappear into it this time."

Jonah raised an eyebrow. "I slipped once."

"You vanished," Eli said, gesturing wildly at the water. "One second you're a scout, the next you're just a hat floating downstream. The creek almost claimed you for its hoard."

Deb's mouth twitched into a small, devastating smirk. "You did yell, though. I think a marmot answered you from three ridges away."

"I did not yell," Jonah said, pulling his shoulders back to reclaim his dignity. "That was a tactical vocalization."

"It was a sound," Eli said, stepping onto the log. "A very specific sound."

Jonah shook his head. "A concerned sound. Purely for your benefit."

"A highly concerned, slightly soprano sound," Deb corrected, her eyes sparkling.

From near the cooking rock, Jonah's father called out, "If anybody makes a highly concerned sound today, I want to know why."

Jonah didn't turn around, keeping his eyes on his friends. "Define high."

His mom laughed, the sound bright against the quiet of the meadow. "Anything we can hear from camp."

The banter was familiar, a layer of playful energy over a foundation of absolute seriousness. They gathered around the pot of oats, adding dried berries and nuts with the focus of scientists preparing a field sample. Eli distributed his berries with mathematical precision, ensuring no single spoonful had an unfair advantage over the others.

"Do the berries need assigned seats, or can they sit wherever?" Jonah asked, hovering his spoon over Eli's bowl just to watch him flinch.

"They require a specific structural distribution for optimal caloric intake," Eli said without looking up, nudging a stray huckleberry two millimeters to the left with his thumb. "Obviously."

The breakfast was eaten in a comfortable, focused silence. Their parents sat nearby, not hovering, but watching with the practiced eyes of mentors who had spent years drilling them on weather, water, knots, and bear distance. Jonah felt the scrutiny, but it didn't feel like a lack of trust. It felt like a final inspection before a launch.

His father stood up and walked over, his boots silent on the damp grass. He didn't give a speech. He just looked at the three of them, his gaze lingering on the packs and the way they were sitting on the kids' shoulders. He was the kind of

man who taught by asking questions, a method honed over a thousand miles of trail where the wrong answer meant a cold meal or a wet tent. He wasn't checking their gear; he was checking their judgment, looking for the quiet confidence that only came from having done the work until it became second nature.

"What's the backup plan for the upper basin?" his father asked, his voice low and steady.

"If the clouds stack over the ridge by fourteen-hundred, the risk on the ramp is too high. We drop to the bench," Jonah said, looking to Deb. "We'll take the shelter of the timber over the exposure of the high ground," she added, her voice steady, taking on the clipped, analytical tone they'd all learned together.

"Good," his father said. "What's the backup plan's backup plan?"

"Lower Cedar Camp," Deb answered, her voice firm. "We have enough rations to wait out a forty-eight-hour cell if we have to."

His father nodded once, a sharp, satisfied movement. "Make good decisions."

It was the family mantra, a reminder that in the wilderness, enthusiasm was a tool but analysis was a survival skill. Jonah's mother handed him a strip of dried apple. She didn't offer a warning; she just studied his posture and the way he'd already

begun to scan the timberline. It was a ranger's look, one that checked for alertness and found it.

They moved to the edge of the meadow, where the gold light of the morning met the deep, shadowed green of the timber line. The transition was abrupt. One step held the open sky and the safety of the base camp; the next would be under the canopy, where the sound of the creek would become their primary navigation. The scent of pine resin and damp bark thickened as they approached the trees.

Jonah stopped at the boundary, his hand resting on the strap of his pack. He felt a strange hollowness in his chest. The sudden, grounding awareness hit him: the safety net was being retracted. This wasn't a day hike. This was the first time they were the masters of their own movement. He looked at Deb and Eli, seeing the same quiet intensity in their eyes. They weren't just friends today; they were a team.

"Ready?" Jonah asked.

"Already there," Deb said.

Eli tapped his waterproof notebook against his thigh. "The mountain has the map. We just have to read it."

There was no dramatic goodbye, no waving from the adults. A single nod passed between the generations, a hand-off of sorts. Jonah took a final pull from his water bottle, stowed it in the side mesh, and checked that the cap was seated. He turned his back on the meadow and stepped into the

shadows of the forest. The air cooled instantly, and the light fractured into shifting shards of gold and emerald as it hit the needles overhead.

The ground changed underfoot, transitioning from the soft, yielding grass to the firm, needle-covered earth of the spruce forest. Jonah adjusted his stride, feeling the weight of the pack settle into his hips. He took the lead, sliding into the discipline of the trail. They moved softly, falling into a rhythm where the only sound was the muffled strike of their boots on the needles. The forest didn't go silent as they passed; the squirrels kept chattering and the wind kept its pace through the spruce. He scanned the path for sign and checked the canopy for widowmakers: those dead, heavy branches hung up in the spruce that could drop without a sound. His parents had taught him early: never trust a limb that didn't have needles. With a clear path overhead, his energy focused into the steady, rhythmic pace of the backcountry.

The creek stayed with them, hidden by the brush but announcing its presence with a low, constant roar that vibrated in the soles of his boots. It was the thread they would follow, the navigational line that would carry them into the heart of the stone country. Jonah didn't look back. He watched the way the light hit the bark of the trees and the way the moss grew thickest on the north-facing stones.

A few hundred yards in, they reached a point where the timber tightened, the trunks of the ancient spruce closing

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around them like a gateway. The sound of the base camp had vanished, replaced by the wind in the needles and the chatter of the water. Jonah slowed, his boots finding a solid patch of granite that pushed up through the soil.

He glanced at Eli, who was already jotting a quick note in his journal, his face set in a look of deep concentration. Deb was scanning the canopy, her observational skills already mapping the terrain they hadn't reached yet. They were moving as a single unit now, a cohesive group that shared a language of competence and silence.

Jonah adjusted his pack, the nylon creaking softly. The freedom he had wanted was here, but it felt different than he had imagined. It wasn't loud or explosive. It was quiet, heavy, and immensely sharp. Every choice they made from this moment on belonged entirely to them. Every mistake was their own to solve.

"Water level is consistent," Eli noted, looking up from his notebook. "No significant murkiness."

"Good," Jonah said. "Let's keep it that way."

He stepped forward, his boots making a clean, hollow sound on the granite. The meadow was gone, swallowed by the trees, and the high ridges were waiting. He didn't rush his pace. He followed the rhythm of the water, moving deeper into the shadows where the real work began.

2

Creekline

Shadows hit them with the weight of a physical barrier. As the canopy closed overhead, the light fractured into shards of emerald and gray. The air cooled instantly, carrying a thick, resinous scent of crushed needles and damp bark. Somewhere to his right, the creek announced itself with a low, constant mutter that felt more like a vibration in his boots than a sound in his ears. It was a navigation line, steady and indifferent, threading through the root tangles and granite ribs of the forest floor.

Jonah took the lead, adjusting the weight of his pack as the ground shifted from soft grass to the firm, needle-packed earth of the spruce forest. He watched the way the light hit the trees, noting the thickest moss on the north-facing stones to verify their heading. To his left, Eli moved with a quiet, focused energy, already scanning the understory for plant transitions. Deb followed a few paces back, her eyes

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moving from the ground to the canopy in a rhythmic sweep that Jonah knew meant she was scanning the upper branches for loose, hanging deadwood.

The ground began to tilt, the creek narrowing as it fought against a rising gradient of stone. Jonah stepped onto a large, moss-darkened rock, a granite plate that looked like a permanent anchor. As his weight transitioned, the stone gave a sharp, sickening lurch. He didn't scramble; he dropped his center of gravity, throwing his weight toward the uphill bank until his heel bit into a dry root. He went still, listening to the hollow grind of the rock settling back into the mud.

"Okay," he muttered, his heart finding a steadier rhythm as he studied the rock. "That one's a liar."

Deb didn't stop, but her gaze dropped to the stone as she approached. "Edge or the whole thing?"

"The front edge," Jonah said, indicating the fail point with his boot. "The mud underneath is still saturated; it's sitting on a slurry."

Eli dropped to a crouch, his palm flat on the granite. He performed a slow mechanical test, watching the displacement of the mossy water at the base. "The center is pinned," Eli confirmed. "Load it vertically and avoid the lip. It won't shift unless you give it lateral momentum," Eli said, looking up at Jonah. "Just don't surprise it. Rocks hate surprises."

“Noted.” Jonah reset his stance, placing his heel squarely over the stone's center of gravity and loading it with slow, vertical pressure. The granite held, the mud beneath it compressed. He stepped off onto the far bank, feeling the familiar surge of adrenaline beginning to cool. “Perimeter awareness check,” he said. “You all passed”, he said, masking the tremor in his breath with a quick, ranger-son grin.

“Barely,” Deb said, stepping over the rock entirely with a long-legged stride that made Jonah’s caution look excessive. “Keep moving. We’re already starting to lose the morning chill.”

They followed the creek as it tucked tight against a steep bank. The water had been busy since their last visit, carving deep into the soil and leaving a line of spruce roots exposed and gripping at open air. Deb’s hand caught Jonah’s shoulder, pulling him back a half-step. She pointed to a patch of seemingly solid earth where the grass hung just a bit too low over the water. Jonah knelt, tapping the ground with his palm; it sounded hollow.

“Undercut,” he said, looking back at them. “The trail is still there, but the ground supporting it isn't. One heavy step and you’re in the drink with three feet of sod on top of you.”

Deb nodded once, her expression shifting into that clinical, evaluative mask she wore when the mountain stopped being a playground. “Stay high,” Deb said, her voice dropping into the clipped tone of a site report. “We angle up the slope and

bypass the whole bend. It's not worth the risk for ten feet of flat ground."

They climbed ten yards up the slope, their boots sinking into a loose layer of needles that shifted with every step. Eli stopped near a strip of exposed, sandy soil and pointed toward a dark, moving line. A colony of ants was busy traversing a miniature canyon created by a recent washout, their path a perfect, winding detour around the chaos of the fallen earth.

"They rebuilt the highway already," Eli said, his voice quiet with a nerdish sort of pride. "That washout probably happened during the rain two nights ago. They don't waste time debating the geography. They just see the break and find the new contour."

Jonah watched them for a second, fascinated by the tiny, relentless efficiency of it. "No committee meetings," he said. "Just work and movement. Kind of humbling."

"Everything up here is humbling if you're paying attention," Deb said, adjusting her shoulder straps. "Let's find the crossing before the creek decides to change its mind again."

The timber thinned slightly as they reached a point where a massive, ancient pine had fallen across the water, its bark stripped gray by years of sun and ice. It formed a natural bridge about four feet above a section where the creek narrowed into a slick, fast-moving ribbon. The roar here was localized and sharp, the sound of water being forced through a stone throat.

Jonah stepped onto the base of the log, testing the grip. The wood was bone-dry at the start, but as it reached the midpoint over the spray, it took on a dark, wet sheen. He took three steady steps, his arms out, his eyes locked on the far bank. He moved as he'd been taught, keeping three points of contact and treating the log almost like a vertical wall. He felt the sixty-pound pack trying to dictate his center of gravity, a heavy, indifferent force that required constant, agonizing micro-adjustments in his ankles.

Halfway across, his heel found a patch of neon-green algae that had bloomed in the mist of the spray. It was slicker than ice. His foot went out from under him, and for a terrifying, suspended second, Jonah felt the world tilt. He didn't fall entirely, but his right leg plunged off the side of the log, his boot hitting the water with a heavy splash.

The cold was a physical shock, a needle-sharp bite that traveled from his ankle to his chest in a heartbeat. He scrambled, his fingers digging into the rough, weather-beaten wood of the log until he regained his balance. He hauled his leg out, the water streaming from his boot in a heavy, saturated pour, and lunged for the far bank. He landed on the gravel bar, shivering and breathing hard.

"That," Jonah said, his voice tight, "was not part of the plan."

Eli and Deb crossed more cautiously, using the rougher knots in the wood for purchase. When they reached him, Jonah was already sitting on a flat stone, tugging at his wet laces. His

right boot was heavy, the leather darkened by the soak, and a steady drip was forming a puddle in the gray silt at his feet.

"Boot-soak," Deb said, her voice landing somewhere between a diagnosis and a sigh. "First hour of the first day. That's a new record, Jonah."

Jonah pulled off his sock and wrung it out, a stream of icy water splashing onto his bare toes. His skin was already a pale, mottled red from the temperature. "I saw the algae," he said, his jaw tight. "I just thought I could clear it with a longer stride. I didn't account for the pack's momentum."

Eli reached into his own pack and pulled out a small, quick-dry camp towel, handing it over without a word. "The creek doesn't care about your stride," he said gently. "Cold water holds more oxygen, but it also holds more consequences. You know the rule. Wet feet lead to hot spots, and hot spots lead to a three-day limp."

Jonah dried his foot, the friction bringing a faint, tingling warmth back to his skin. Eli reached into the side pocket of his pack and tossed a small, wax-paper-wrapped bundle onto Jonah's lap. "Calorie replacement," Eli said. "Your internal heater is going to be working overtime to dry that boot." He looked at the wet boot, then at the darkening shadows under the trees. He could feel the frustration bubbling up: the urge to laugh it off and keep moving, to prove that a little water wouldn't slow him down. But he remembered his father's face in the meadow, the quiet weight of the word decisions.

“Operational pause,” Jonah said, the decision coming from his training rather than his ego. “I’m swapping to dry wool now. I’m not carrying a hot spot into the Stone Country.”

Deb sat down on the log beside him, her expression softening. “Good decision, Jonah. It’s better to lose twenty minutes now than half a day tomorrow. Besides, Eli probably wants to document the exact species of algae that defeated you.”

“Klebsormidium, most likely,” Eli said, already pulling out his notebook. “It thrives in high-oxygen, high-light environments exactly like this log.”

Jonah unwrapped the bundle to find two dense honey-and-nut clusters. He popped one into his mouth, the sweetness cutting through the metallic taste of adrenaline. He shook his head, a small, genuine laugh escaping him as he leaned back against a granite boulder. “Unbelievable. I’m being professionally cataloged by a biology textbook while my toes are turning into icicles.”

“It’s for the permanent record,” Eli said, his pen moving quickly over the page. “Subject demonstrated high-velocity aquatic entry. Subject’s ego sustained minor tarnishing.”

“Worth it,” Jonah said, though he winced as he pulled on the fresh, dry wool of his spare sock. The warmth was immediate and welcome. He looked at his friends, the way they had settled in around him without complaint, and the hollowness he’d felt earlier began to fill with something steadier. They

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were a mile into the timber, the meadow was a memory, and the mountain was already testing them. He liked the challenge. He even liked the cold.

He laced his boot, tighter this time, and stood up to test the feel of the damp leather. It was heavy, but manageable. He looked upstream where the creek vanished into a deeper, darker fold of the stone country. The real work was just beginning, and he intended to stay on top of the rocks from here on out.

Jonah adjusted his pack and took the lead again, moving with a slower, more deliberate rhythm toward the sound of the rising water.



3

Where the Water Falls

They didn't see the waterfall first; they felt it. The air shifted before anything came into view, cooling against their skin and carrying the mineral scent of churned granite and water thrown into motion. The creek narrowed as they followed it, angling sharply between darker rock, and its sound deepened; not louder, but more focused, as if everything ahead was pulling it into a single place.

Jonah slowed without meaning to, his head tilting slightly as he listened. The damp weight of his right boot, though mostly drained, reminded him of the creek's sudden price. "This is bigger than I thought," he said, not looking at either of them so much as into the sound itself.

Deb didn't answer right away. She was watching the ground now, noticing the way the banks had changed. Roots were more exposed, the soil thinner, rock pushing upward through everything else like it had been waiting for the dirt to fail.

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Moss gave way to sun-bleached stone in patches where the water had receded since the early-season surges. The terrain wasn't just different: it was tightening. It felt like the August sun had stripped away the meadow's softness to reveal the bone-deep granite beneath.

Spray touched Jonah's sleeve before the falls came into view, a light mist carried farther than expected by the funneling walls. He stopped, the realization settling a half-second before the sight did. Cool air drifted up the canyon carrying the unmistakable signature of a large volume of moving water. "We're getting close," he said quietly.

They pushed through a tight bend of alder, branches brushing their shoulders with a damp, leafy resistance, and stepped onto a broad slab of granite angled toward the sound. The stone felt different immediately: cooler, smoother; polished in places where thousands of years of water had worked it into a satin finish. Jonah tested his footing instinctively, leaning his weight into the ball of his left foot to gauge the friction. The granite had a polished sheen that suggested grip was a matter of physics rather than intent. Dark streaks marked the stone where winter ice had scarred the surface: tiny, rough fissures that offered the only reliable purchase. Jonah traced one with his thumb, noting the grit of the feldspar crystals. It was a textured map of the creek's history.

"Careful," Deb said, not as a warning so much as a procedural reminder.

“Obviously,” Jonah replied, though he adjusted anyway, shortening his stride as he moved forward.

The roar built steadily, not chaotic or violent, but strong, in a way that didn’t need to prove itself. When the trees finally opened, the waterfall revealed itself all at once. White water dropped thirty feet clean from a granite lip, sunlight catching the spray in suspended sparks that looked like static in the air. It was a constant, rhythmic force, something that had been happening long before their arrival and would persist long after their departure.

Jonah didn’t say anything for a moment. He stepped closer, drawn toward the edge by a pull as natural as gravity, and let the sound settle around him until it drowned out the internal list of miles and minutes. The water fell into a clear, wide basin below, spreading outward in steady pulses before gathering again to continue downstream as the same creek they had followed all morning.

“That counts,” Jonah said finally, his voice sounding thin against the wall of sound.

Eli crouched at the basin’s edge, already reaching for his notebook. “Basin diameter looks to be about forty feet,” he said, his eyes scanning the surface tension where the falling water met the pool. “Depth is solid. There’s a slope on the north side, but it evens out once you’re past the drop line.”

Jonah set his pack down, the sudden absence of the thirty-pound load making him feel light enough to float off the

rock. He pulled his filter from the top brain of his pack. "I'm down to half a liter," he said. "Let's harvest while the water's this clear." He moved closer, crouching at the edge where the granite dipped toward the water. "Checking temperature," he said, leaning forward.

Deb didn't look over, but her voice held a teasing lilt. "With your hand, Jonah."

"Yes, with my hand," he said, dipping his fingers into the pool. The cold hit immediately. Sharp and clean, the kind of temperature that didn't linger so much as snap the senses into focus. He pulled his hand back with a quick breath, a grin surfacing despite the chill. "That's mountain cold. Not playing around."

"Excellent cold," Eli agreed, pointing toward the center. "The strongest push is right there. You'll drift left if you let it carry you."

Deb hadn't joined them at the water's edge. She had drifted along the edge of the basin instead, her attention catching on a narrow strip of damp soil tucked beside a pocket of sedge grass. She stopped completely, her shoulders squaring in a way that signaled a shift in focus. "Hey," she said, not loudly, but with a specific weight to her tone.

Jonah and Eli reached her side instantly. They fell into a semi-circle around the patch of earth, their collective training overriding the rush of the falls. The prints were pressed into

the silt where the water had recently receded: rounded pads, four toes, no claw marks. They were large, nearly the size of Jonah's palm, and clearly defined in the mud.

"Mountain lion," Deb said, watching the tracks carefully. She didn't disturb the silt, letting the markings tell their story. "Clawless entry. That's definitely cat, not canine."

Deb leaned in closer, her finger tracing the air above the silt. Jonah watched the spacing of the strides, matching his observation to her silence. "Not fresh," he noted, noting the way a small amount of water had seeped into the bottom of the heel pad. "Maybe six hours old."

"Not fresh," Eli agreed, crouching lower and tracing the line of travel with his eyes. "But he moved through recently. Straight line, no circling. He wasn't hunting here; he was traveling. Probably used the falls as a landmark, just like we did."

Jonah straightened and let his gaze drift upward toward the granite rim above the falls. The dark shadows of the stunted hemlocks seemed more substantial now, more capable of holding weight. It didn't feel like a threat, but the world had just become significantly more populated. "We're not the only ones using the creek for navigation," he said.

Deb gave a small shrug, her eyes never leaving the rim. "We never are. We just have the records to prove it now."

The waterfall continued its indifferent work beside them, its sound filling the silence between their words. Jonah looked

back toward the blue-green heart of the basin, then at the sun-warmed stone at his feet. The awareness of the predator was a steady hum in the back of his mind, but it didn't cancel out the heat of the afternoon or the pull of the water.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" Jonah asked, glancing at his friends.

"Scout first," Deb said, already moving toward the high point of the granite lip. "If we're going in, we do it right. No surprises."

They spread out across the basin, each taking a different section to inspect. Jonah walked the perimeter, his boots tapping the stone as he listened for the hollow resonance of a shelf. He tapped a flat section with his heel, listening for the hollow echo that indicated an air pocket or a thin shelf. "Solid here," he called out, the rhythmic pump of his water filter providing a mechanical counterpoint to the roar of the falls as he finished topping off his reservoir.

Eli was at the far edge, testing the current with a long, sun-bleached branch he'd found in the driftwood pile. He pushed it deep into the churning center. "It's at least ten feet at the impact point," he reported, watching how the branch resisted the downward force of the falls. "The shelf starts about five feet out from the rock face. It's a clean drop."

Deb crouched near the shallower edge, bracing one hand on dry stone while she pressed the other beneath the surface,

feeling the angle of the underwater slope. "Bottom angles toward the outlet," she said, her voice clinical. "You won't stay where you land unless you compensate with a strong stroke to the right."

"So we start opposite that," Jonah said, already visualizing the trajectory. He felt the familiar thrum of anticipation, the kinetic energy that always built before a jump. He looked at the cat tracks one last time, then back to the water. The balance was there: the respect for the wild and the joy of moving through it.

One by one, they stepped back from the edge and pulled off their boots and socks, setting them on a stretch of granite where the sun had spent the morning baking the surface. Bare feet found better purchase on the rough-grained rock, the heat of the stone working its way into Jonah's skin. He felt the grit of the granite, the tiny crystals of quartz and feldspar biting into his soles.

Jonah stepped to the very edge of the lip, looking down into the churning blue eye of the basin. The mist was a cool veil against his face. "Feet first," he said, more a confirmation of protocol than a suggestion. Eli nodded beside him, his expression one of focused calculation. Deb gave one last scan of the surrounding trees, her eyes sharp and observant, before stepping into line. "On three," she said.

They stepped forward into the empty air together. The fall felt longer than it was, a suspended moment of silence before the

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cold hit. It was a physical blow, a total immersion that stole Jonah's breath and replaced it with a frantic, icy clarity. He plunged deep, the blue world swallowing him whole, before the buoyancy of his lungs pulled him back toward the light.

He surfaced first, his hair plastered to his forehead, gasping as the air hit his lungs. He let out a sharp, jagged laugh that was half-shock and half-triumph. "That," he sputtered, wiping water from his eyes, "is definitely cold."

Eli popped up a yard away, his face pale but his eyes bright. "Snowmelt," he managed, already treading water with efficient, steady movements. "Pure oxygen. Excellent for the circulation."

Jonah shook his head, grinning as he began a strong crawl toward the granite shelf. "You and your oxygen, Eli. It's just freezing."

Deb surfaced a second later, clearing the strongest downward push of the falls with two powerful strokes before settling into the calmer water near the edge. She didn't waste energy on splashing; she moved with the same economy she used on the trail, her eyes already scanning the rock for the best exit point.

They didn't linger in the water. The mountain cold was a guest that overstayed its welcome quickly. Jonah crossed the pool once more, feeling the current try to tug him toward the outlet, but he leaned into the stroke and found the submerged ledge where the granite rose to meet him. He hauled himself out, water streaming off his clothes in heavy, rhythmic drips.

He sat on the warm stone, the contrast of the sun-heated granite against his freezing skin making him shiver. "Consistent," he said, looking at the water. "Exactly like we scouted."

Deb climbed out beside him, pushing her wet hair back from her face. She looked at the cat tracks in the mud, then at the high ridges waiting for them in the distance. "Until it isn't," she said quietly. She didn't sound afraid; she sounded prepared.

They stood in the sun until the edge of the chill wore off, the granite acting as a massive radiator. Jonah watched the steam rise faintly from his damp fleece. He felt a steady, quiet confidence growing in his chest. They had found the milestone, documented the resident, and taken the plunge. He reached for his dry socks, his fingers moving with a slow, deliberate precision.

Jonah pulled his boots on and laced them tight. He looked at the waterfall one last time, then toward the high stone country that lay ahead. They were moving again.