

TRAILMARKED

Granite & Thunder

W. A. Bales

1

Launch Along the Water

Morning did not rush them.

It unfolded.

Light spread slow and gold across the meadow while mist hovered low along the creek, undecided about leaving. The air still carried night's cool edge, thin and alpine, the kind that made every breath feel sharp and clean. Grass bowed under silver beads of dew. Somewhere in the distance a raven called once, low and steady.

Jonah had been awake for ten minutes before he admitted it.

He lay on his back inside the tent, watching sunlight filter through the mesh overhead and turn the world faintly green. Pine silhouettes shifted softly whenever wind moved through the branches. The creek ran steady beyond the meadow, a bright ribbon of sound threading through grass and stone.

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No clouds.

He checked twice, rolling onto one elbow and peering through the tent flap.

Still none.

“Okay,” he muttered. “That’s promising.”

He stretched an arm upward and brushed the tent roof lightly with his fingertips. Cool condensation gathered there. Not dripping. Just present. His muscles felt rested but alert. Not stiff. Ready to move.

From beyond the tent wall came the low murmur of adult voices. A metal cup tapped against rock.

Coffee. Always coffee.

The stove hissed once and settled into a steady whisper. The smell of oats drifted across the meadow. Metal spoons scraped enamel. Someone laughed quietly.

Fuel.

Jonah unzipped the tent and stepped into cold grass.

The chill ran instantly through the thin soles of his boots and up into his ankles. He welcomed it. The kind of cold that told you you were fully awake.

Deb was already up.

W. A. BALES

Of course she was.

She sat cross-legged on a flat stone near the edge of the meadow, boots already on and planted firmly, pack open in front of her like a system she was fine-tuning. She wasn't tightening straps out of worry. She was calibrating. Frame centered. Sleeping pad rolled tight enough to hold shape. Bedroll cinched clean. She tugged a side compression strap once, then again, feeling for balance rather than guessing.

Real gear.

Nothing decorative.

Nothing extra.

Nothing swinging loose.

Eli came up from the creek barefoot, boots in one hand, shaking water from his other. Droplets flashed in the sun before disappearing into grass. His pant legs were damp to mid-calf where he had stepped into the water, and his hair was still wet at the edges. He had that look already, slightly distant, as if he were mapping the basin in layers no one else could see yet. He set his boots beside his pack but did not put them on yet.

"Flow's lower than last week," he said, looking back toward the creek.

Granite & Thunder

Jonah followed his line of sight to the narrow channel cutting through the meadow. The creek ran bright and contained along the meadow's edge, weaving around granite ribs like it had a memory of where to go.

"Lower is easier," Jonah said.

"For now," Deb replied, not warning. Just calculating. She glanced briefly at the creek as she said it, reading the same channel.

Eli nodded once. "Storms build fast up here."

Jonah grinned. "We build faster."

Deb's mouth curved slightly. Not dismissing it. Just filing it.

Behind them, the stove clicked off.

Jonah grabbed an enamel mug and filled it without sitting. Steam curled upward and disappeared into the morning. Deb joined him, scooping oats with quick efficiency. Eli stepped into his boots now, drying feet already warming, and added dried berries with careful precision, distributing them evenly as if that mattered.

They ate standing.

Hot.

Simple.

Done.

They were not sneaking out.

That was never the deal.

Three months of conditioning hikes. Two map quizzes. One full gear redo because Jonah had forgotten to reseal his seams properly and Eli had noticed before anyone else. They had earned this launch.

“You check the filter?” Deb asked, still scanning her pack but not looking at him.

“Twice,” Jonah said.

Eli added mildly, “He did.”

Jonah shot him a look. “You don’t have to verify everything.”

“I know.”

Deb nodded once. “Good.”

Not corrective. Confirmed.

Jonah pulled the folded topo map from his side pocket and spread it over a smooth granite slab beside the creek. The paper crackled as it opened. Contour lines unfurled into ridges and bowls and tight blue threads marking water in patient curves.

The basin opened before them in paper and possibility.

Granite & Thunder

It looked small.

It would not feel small.

They were not hiking to a destination. They were following water. Ridge lines. Anything that looked worth climbing.

Jonah traced the creek upward with one finger.

“Falls first.”

Deb did not hesitate. “Obviously.”

Eli marked a small pencil X near a bend in the creek. Not a goal. Just reference. He shaded lightly beside it, noting elevation without explaining why.

Behind them, Jonah’s dad’s voice carried across the meadow.

“Make good decisions.”

Jonah did not turn around.

“Always do.”

“Mostly,” Eli added.

A quiet chuckle followed from somewhere near the stove.

Deb stood in one smooth motion and hoisted her pack. The weight settled across her hips like it belonged there. She rolled her shoulders once to test balance and then looked toward the treeline the way someone looks at a door that is already unlocked.

W. A. BALES

Jonah swung his pack on and bounced once under it. The straps pressed firm against his shoulders. The hip belt hugged tight.

Familiar weight.

Good weight.

“Feels right,” he said.

Deb stepped closer and reached without commentary, smoothing a slight twist in one strap with two fingers. Not correction. Refinement.

“There,” she said, releasing the strap.

Better.

Eli slid a small waterproof notebook into his side pouch and checked the zipper twice. Then once more.

Jonah caught it immediately.

“Really?”

“Always.”

“You’re not going to write about breakfast, are you?”

Eli considered that seriously. “Depends how it goes.”

Jonah snorted.

Deb stepped toward the tree line first, boots silent on the grass.

Granite & Thunder

“Creekline?” she asked, glancing toward the sound of moving water ahead.

Jonah grinned.

“Creekline.”

Eli fell in beside them, boots now fully laced, feet dry and ready.

They did not look back at the meadow.

They did not need to.

The trees swallowed them quickly. Light shifted from gold to green. Sound narrowed to footsteps and water and the soft brush of pack fabric against pine bark. The air cooled by a few degrees and smelled of sap and damp earth.

Jonah adjusted his stride to match the rhythm of the creek moving just beyond the trees.

The trip had started.

2

Creepline

The timber swallowed the meadow faster than it should have.

One step into shade and the air shifted. Cooler. Resin-thick. Damp bark and cold water moving somewhere just out of sight.

The creek ran to their right, narrower here, slipping between rounded stones and root tangles like it knew exactly where it was going. It didn't hesitate. It didn't debate. It followed gravity and stone.

Jonah stepped onto a moss-dark rock and felt it shift half an inch under his boot.

He rocked back immediately.

“Okay.”

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Deb didn't look over.

"Soft on that edge."

Eli crouched beside the rock and pressed his weight slowly into it. It shifted again, then settled when pressure stayed steady.

"It holds gradual," he said.

Jonah tried again, slower this time. Heel first. Weight forward inch by inch.

The rock steadied.

He crossed clean.

"Counts."

The creek narrowed again, tucking tight against a bank undercut by last spring's runoff. Exposed roots reached into open air where soil used to be.

Jonah stepped back instinctively, boots stopping short of the hollowed edge.

"Undercut."

Deb nodded once. "Stay high."

They angled up the slope instead of hugging the water. Pine needles shifted underfoot where last season's storm had loosened everything by just enough to matter. Not dangerous. Just unreliable.

W. A. BALES

Eli stepped over a root and paused mid-stride.

“Look at that,” he said, pointing toward the exposed soil.

A line of ants crossed exposed soil in disciplined precision, rerouted around a washout where water had carved through their original path.

“They rebuilt overnight,” he said.

Jonah glanced down at the moving line.

“Efficient.”

Deb shifted their line slightly to firmer ground.

The creek dropped two feet over a granite lip and spread thin across a smooth slab.

Jonah grinned.

“That’s slick.”

Eli crouched and ran a finger through the surface film on the wet stone.

“Algae’s already starting.”

“Good,” Jonah said. “That means it’s alive.”

Deb didn’t argue.

They crossed above it instead, boots staying on dry stone.

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The creek braided briefly into shallow fingers over pale gravel. The water was so clear it almost disappeared until light bent around pebbles and flashed silver along their edges.

Jonah crouched at the edge and slipped one boot off, then the other, setting them on dry gravel. Bare feet stepped carefully into the shallow water. He dipped his hand in.

Cold hit instantly. Sharp and clean. It shot up his arm like a wire.

“Okay,” he said through his teeth. “That’s real.”

“Cold keeps oxygen high,” Eli said.

Jonah blinked at him.

“Did you just say that for fun?”

Eli shrugged.

“You asked.”

“I did not.”

Jonah stepped back onto dry gravel, wiped his feet briefly against warm stone, and pulled his boots back on.

A dragonfly skimmed low over the water, blue-green and metallic in the filtered sun.

Jonah swiped lazily at it and missed by a foot.

“It’s mocking me.”

“It’s not thinking about you,” Deb said.

“That’s worse.”

They followed the creek where it pressed against a low rock wall and narrowed into a slick ribbon. The sound sharpened there, water compressing into a thinner throat before spilling out again.

A fallen pine lay angled across the water. Not fully bridging it. Close enough.

Jonah slowed.

“Log crossing.”

Deb tilted her head, studying the bark surface.

“It’s wet.”

“That’s part of the point.”

Eli stepped forward first and pressed his boot into the bark. Soft in places. Solid in others. He shifted weight slowly and crossed without drama.

Deb followed, boots placed with intention.

Jonah went last.

Halfway across he glanced down at the water. It wasn’t deep. Just deep enough.

His heel slipped.

Cold flooded his sock instantly as his boot dipped into the creek.

He stepped off the log with a sharp inhale and moved to dry ground immediately.

“Okay. That is refreshing.”

Deb didn’t hide the smile.

“You said you weren’t falling in.”

“I didn’t fall.”

“You’re wet.”

“Different category.”

Jonah stepped out of the wet boot and peeled off the soaked sock, squeezing water from it before setting both on a sunlit rock to drain. Bare foot rested on warm granite while he let air do the work.

Eli crouched beneath the log and leaned sideways.

“There’s something under here,” he said, looking beneath the submerged branch.

Jonah dropped beside him instantly, still barefoot on the warm stone.

A small crawdad clung to the underside of a submerged branch, claws raised in disproportionate confidence.

Jonah grinned.

“Look at that.”

The crawdad shifted slightly, then froze again.

Deb stood and scanned upstream automatically, boots steady on dry ground.

“Let him win.”

Eli smiled.

Jonah pulled his dry sock from his pack, put it on, and stepped back into his boot, tightening the laces firmly before standing.

They moved on.

They stayed on the near bank this time, letting the creek bend away and then back toward them. The terrain tightened briefly into a shallow notch where granite pressed close on both sides. The water accelerated through it, flashing white where it struck submerged stone.

Jonah leaned over slightly.

“See that?” he said, nodding toward the narrowing channel.

Eli followed his line.

“Different flow pattern.”

“It’s not random.”

Granite & Thunder

Deb stepped across a narrow strip of exposed rock that bridged the notch and paused.

“It’s channeling,” she said. “Stone decides.”

“Gravity assists,” Eli added.

They moved again.

The ground leveled for ten yards and then tilted upward where a small side stream trickled down to meet the main channel. Not loud. Just persistent.

Eli stepped out of his boots briefly and into the smaller stream on purpose, bare feet settling into the shallow flow.

“Control test.”

“Why?” Jonah asked.

“Temperature comparison.”

“Different?”

“Marginally.”

“Worth it?”

Eli considered.

“Yes.”

He stepped back out, dried his feet quickly on sun-warmed rock, and put his boots back on.

Jonah laughed.

“Good.”

The creek’s sound shifted again.

Lower. More compressed. Focused.

Jonah tilted his head.

“Do you hear that?”

Eli listened toward the sound upstream.

“Gradient’s increasing.”

“Translation: louder.”

“Translation: probably something interesting.”

“Falls?”

“Maybe.”

They moved faster now. Not rushing. Just pulled.

The ground angled subtly upward. Roots thickened. Rock showed through soil more often. The air felt tighter. Cooler.

The sound deepened ahead.

Not chatter anymore.

Intent.

Granite & Thunder

The creek bent wide around a shallow gravel bar where the trees thinned and sunlight spilled clean and bright.

The air felt different here. Open. Less enclosed.

Jonah slowed first.

“Ten,” he said, signaling a ten-minute rest stop.

Deb didn’t argue.

They dropped packs in a loose triangle facing the creek.

The weight leaving Jonah’s shoulders felt like someone had unhooked gravity. He rolled one shoulder experimentally.

“Okay. That’s better.”

He unlaced his boot and peeled off his damp sock, stretching it over a sun-warmed rock. Bare foot rested comfortably on warm stone.

“I meant to do that.”

Deb handed him a dry pair without comment.

“You brought extra?”

She raised one eyebrow.

“You didn’t?”

“Of course I did.”

He had not.

W. A. BALES

Eli crouched at the creek, boots on dry gravel, and filled a bottle, letting it overflow before tightening the lid.

Jonah tore open a wax-paper bundle. Flatbread. Hard cheese. Smoked meat.

He held it up reverently.

“Best breakfast.”

“You already had breakfast,” Deb said.

“That was pre-breakfast.”

She unwrapped apple slices and passed them across.

They ate in the quiet.

Water sliding over stone.

A squirrel rattling bark overhead.

Wind moving once, then settling.

Jonah leaned back, bare foot still resting on warm granite, and squinted up through the canopy.

“Feels different up here.”

“It is,” Deb said.

“Listen,” Eli added.

They did.

Granite & Thunder

The water's tone had shifted again. Deeper. More concentrated.

"Falls aren't far," Eli said.

Jonah grinned.

"Called it."

A flicker of movement caught Deb's eye across the creek.

She stilled instantly.

"Don't move."

Jonah froze mid-bite.

On the far bank, a young mule deer stepped carefully from behind alder. Long legs. Ears high.

It lowered its head to drink.

Jonah's grin softened.

They didn't speak.

The deer drank for several long seconds. Lifted its head. Ears swiveling.

It knew they were there.

It simply decided they weren't important.

After a moment, it stepped back into shadow and disappeared.

Jonah exhaled slowly.

“That never gets old.”

“No,” Deb agreed.

They didn’t move immediately after.

Light shifted slightly, as if something higher up had interrupted the sun for half a second.

Jonah glanced up.

Nothing obvious.

But the air felt subtly different.

Held.

“Wind changed,” Deb said quietly.

Eli listened.

The creek’s tone wasn’t louder.

It was deeper.

Jonah nodded.

“That’s not just bend noise.”

He pulled his dry sock fully into place and laced his boot tight.

They shouldered packs without speaking.

Curiosity had shifted into confirmation.

Eli wrote quickly.

FIELD NOTES — DAY 1

Flow lower than last week.

Log unstable. Jonah claims intentional boot soak.

Mule deer calm. Wind in our favor.

Jonah nodded approvingly.

“Solid.”

Deb glanced at the sky beyond the treeline.

Still blue. Still open.

But faint texture had begun to gather over the highest ridge. Nothing dramatic. Just something building where nothing had been before.

“Let’s move,” she said.

Jonah stood, boots secure, feet dry again.

“Falls.”

“Falls,” Eli agreed.

W. A. BALES

They stepped back into timber.

The creek's voice no longer braided.

It gathered.

Jonah didn't reach for the map.

He didn't need to.

Whatever the water had decided to do up there—

They were walking straight toward it.



3

Where the Water Falls

They didn't see the waterfall first.

They felt it.

The air shifted before the view appeared. Cooler. Damp. Carrying the mineral scent of churned granite and water thrown into motion. The creek narrowed and angled sharply between dark rock walls. Its voice deepened from chatter into something steadier.

Committed.

Jonah tilted his head as they walked.

"It's bigger than I thought."

Deb didn't answer. She was studying the banks now. Roots were more exposed. Soil thinned. Rock pushed upward

through the ground like it had somewhere to be. Moss gave way to slick stone.

The terrain was changing.

Spray touched Jonah's sleeve before he saw the source.

He stopped.

"Oh."

Eli grinned.

"Okay."

Alder branches pressed tight as they rounded a bend, brushing their shoulders. The ground shifted from soft needles to damp granite.

Jonah stepped onto a broad slab that angled toward the sound.

"Careful," Deb said.

"Obviously," Jonah replied, but he slowed anyway.

The granite had a polished sheen. That kind of smooth surface meant grip mattered more than confidence. Dark streaks marked where water had run high during spring melt. The stone felt cool even through his boots.

The roar intensified.

Not violent.

Granite & Thunder

Not wild.

Just strong.

They edged forward.

And then the trees opened.

White water dropped clean from a granite lip ahead, sunlight catching spray in suspended sparks. The sound wasn't chaotic. It was constant. The kind of force that had been happening long before them and would continue long after.

Jonah didn't speak.

He stepped closer.

The waterfall dropped thirty feet into a wide, clear basin below.

Not explosive.

Not raging.

Just powerful.

Water struck the pool and spread outward in steady circular pulses before gathering itself and sliding downstream. The same creek they had followed all morning. Now concentrated. Revealed.

Jonah stood still.

Actually still.

“That counts,” he said quietly.

Deb was scanning the rim above the falls. Studying angles. Ledges. Runoff lines. Places water would track if clouds thickened later.

Always mapping.

Eli crouched at the basin’s edge.

The pool was clearer than he expected. Stone shelves stepped down beneath the surface in pale layers. Shallow near the edges. Darker blue where the falling water churned deeper.

“Depth’s good,” Eli said.

Jonah set his pack down beside the granite and stepped closer to the water.

“I’m checking temperature.”

“With your hand,” Deb said.

“Obviously.”

He crouched and dipped his fingers in.

Cold hit immediately.

Not numb. Not painful.

Bracing.

He sucked in a breath and grinned.

Granite & Thunder

“That’s mountain cold.”

“Good cold?” Eli asked.

“Excellent cold.”

Deb moved along the basin edge instead of toward the water. She stopped near a strip of damp soil beside a small grass pocket.

“Hey.”

Jonah stood immediately.

They crossed together.

The tracks were faint but clear in the damp soil.

Rounded.

Four toes.

No claw marks.

Deb pointed. “Mountain lion. Cats retract their claws when they walk, so you don’t see claw marks like you would with a dog or coyote.”

Not fresh.

But not old.

Jonah’s grin widened.

“Okay.”

“Cat,” Deb said calmly.

Eli studied the stride and spacing.

“Passing through. Not hunting here.”

Jonah looked up toward the granite rim above the falls.

It didn’t feel ominous.

It felt alive.

“We’re not alone.”

Deb shrugged lightly.

“We never are.”

Eli followed the prints upstream with his eyes.

“Travel line. He moved through and kept going.”

Jonah nodded slowly.

“Good.”

The waterfall thundered beside them, steady and indifferent.

He looked back at the pool.

“You thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Scout first,” Deb said.

They circled the basin deliberately.

Granite & Thunder

Jonah walked the perimeter once, boots scraping softly over stone. The sound shifted depending on where he stepped. Hollow where water had undercut the edge. Solid where granite thickened.

“Drop line’s strongest at center,” Eli said, pointing to where the falling water struck and pushed outward.

Deb knelt near the shallow edge and pressed her palm against submerged stone.

“The bottom slopes left. You’ll drift that direction.”

“So start right,” Jonah said.

Spray coated the granite closest to the fall, darkening it nearly black. Algae slicked the lower rim where spring runoff had lingered weeks earlier.

Eli broke a small branch and dragged it slowly through the pool.

“Clear to here,” he said. “Then deep.”

Jonah nodded.

He removed his shoes and socks, setting them beside his pack. Eli and Deb did the same. Bare feet gripped the granite better than wet soles would.

Jonah stepped carefully to the cleanest entry point and measured distance with his eyes.

“Feet first.”

“Obviously,” Eli said, standing beside him.

Deb scanned the rim one more time. Timber stood quiet above them. The creek waited below.

“Three,” Jonah said.

“Three,” Deb confirmed.

They stepped forward together and jumped.

Cold slammed into them.

It stole breath for half a second.

Then gave it back sharper.

Jonah surfaced first, laughing.

“That’s illegal.”

“It’s just snowmelt,” Eli said, surfacing beside him.

“Exactly.”

Deb surfaced last, calm but grinning. She swam two steady strokes sideways, clearing the strongest downward push from the falling water.

They didn’t stay long.

Jonah crossed the basin once, not racing, just testing how the current moved. The water pulled lightly near center but released him near the stone shelf.

Granite & Thunder

“Predictable,” he said.

“Until it isn’t,” Deb replied.

Eli ducked briefly beneath the surface near the fall line, then resurfaced, blinking water from his eyes.

“Pressure’s stronger there.”

Jonah placed his feet on the granite slope beneath the water. The rock felt smooth from years of flow.

“That’s wild.”

They climbed out carefully and stood barefoot on the warm granite.

The world felt sharper.

Edges clearer.

Breath deeper.

They dried briefly in the sun, then pulled their socks and shoes back on.

Eli crouched near the pool again.

“Fish.”

Jonah dropped beside him.

Small alpine trout hovered near the seam where falling water met still water.

“Dinner preview,” Jonah said.

“Maybe,” Deb replied.

Eli pulled a small spool of fishing line from his pack.

“No rod?” Jonah asked.

“Don’t need one.”

He pinched a crumb of flatbread onto the hook and lowered it carefully into the water.

The trout scattered instantly.

Jonah blinked.

“Rude.”

“Our shadows moved,” Eli said. “They saw it.”

Jonah adjusted, crouching lower so less of his shadow fell across the pool.

The line drifted naturally this time.

A silver flash darted forward.

The line twitched.

He waited half a second.

Then lifted.

The hook held.

Granite & Thunder

The trout flashed and twisted hard.

“Easy,” Deb said.

“I am easy,” Jonah muttered.

He guided it gently toward the shallows and lifted it onto damp stone.

Small.

Alive.

Real.

He exhaled.

“Dinner possibility.”

“Later,” Eli said. “Keep moving.”

They released it carefully.

The trout vanished instantly.

Jonah watched the ripples smooth.

“That’s better.”

Eli opened the notebook.

Jonah groaned, smiling.

“What are we today?”

FIELD NOTES — FALLS CONFIRMED.

Pool depth adequate.

Mountain lion passing within recent days.

Jump successful.

Fish evasive.

“Add superior form,” Jonah said.

Eli paused.

Then wrote:

Form debatable.

Deb laughed.

The granite above the falls fractured into shallow channels that twisted unpredictably. Thin ribbons of water slid across stone and disappeared beneath the surface before reappearing farther down.

Eli followed one narrow stream.

“Where does it go?”

Jonah balanced along a dry ridge between two flowing seams.

Granite & Thunder

“Nowhere. Everywhere.”

Deb stepped higher, testing a slab carefully.

“Storm runoff carved new channels here,” she said.

Jonah crouched beside a fresh groove.

“Water’s impatient.”

“Water’s persistent,” Eli corrected.

“That too.”

Above them, clouds had thickened slightly along the higher ridge. Still thin. Still high. But building.

Not threatening.

Just shifting.

The day was still theirs.

They didn’t leave immediately.

Jonah studied the granite wall beside the waterfall.

“It goes.”

Deb stepped beside him and examined the route.

“It goes.”

Eli squinted upward.

W. A. BALES

“Less spray on that side. Better friction.”

“See?” Jonah said. “Science.”

“Friction is science,” Eli replied.

Deb ignored both.

“Three points of contact,” she said. “Move slow.”

Jonah climbed first.

Boot.

Test.

Shift weight.

Commit.

The granite was warm in sunlight and cool in shadow. Rough enough to grip if respected.

Halfway up, his foot slipped half an inch.

He froze.

“Three points,” Eli said calmly.

“I have three.”

“Then keep them.”

Jonah adjusted. Breathed. Continued.

Granite & Thunder

They reached the lip and pulled themselves onto flat stone above the falls.

The creek above didn't plunge.

It wandered.

Braided channels slid across smooth granite shelves. Thin. Clear. Quiet compared to the drop below.

"That's illegal," Jonah said softly.

"Fish," Deb said, already crouching.

Shadow flickered beneath a narrow seam.

Jonah lowered the line again.

This time the hook held quickly.

Small.

Alive.

"Dinner possibility," he said.

They released it.

The trout vanished.

Jonah watched the current smooth.

"Okay. That counts."

W. A. BALES

Deb stood and looked uphill.

“Ridge.”

The granite above broke into scattered boulders and patches of coarse grass.

They climbed without packs, leaving them safely on the shelf below.

The ridge wasn't a summit.

Just a rise.

But when they crested it, the basin opened wide beneath them.

The waterfall.

The meadow.

The timber they had walked through.

Layered.

Jonah turned slowly.

“Okay.”

Deb scanned north and east, reading drainages.

Eli ran his hand across a lichen-patterned slab.

Wind moved cleanly across the ridge.

Granite & Thunder

Clouds streaked faintly higher above.

Not threatening.

But gathering.

A shadow crossed the granite.

All three looked up.

A golden eagle circled high above the basin, wings stretched wide, riding rising thermals.

Jonah's jaw dropped.

"No way."

"That's not a hawk," Deb said, smiling.

They watched until it drifted toward the higher ridge and became small against the sky.

From this height, the waterfall looked smaller.

Contained.

Perspective mattered.

"Everything's working today," Eli said quietly.

"Best day," Jonah said.

Deb nudged his boot.

W. A. BALES

“Still have to find camp.”

He grinned.

“Best productive day.”

They descended, shouldered their packs, and turned upstream again.

Energy high.

Steps steady.

The waterfall’s roar faded behind them.

The creek thinned and braided again, climbing toward higher stone.

Jonah glanced back once.

“That absolutely counts.”

No one argued.

They turned upstream.

And the basin disappeared behind the trees.