

Chapter 1

The ridge loomed in the distance. Evan Nellis clutched an oak tree and gasped for breath. Honeysuckle and rotting carcass wafted on the spring wind. His stomach roiled. He couldn't continue. Screw this job.

Twenty feet upslope, Gordon Shaw sipped coffee from a thermos. "That's poison oak twining up the trunk, bud."

Evan jerked away from the tree. "Didn't see it."

Gordon smirked. "Hard to miss."

"I'm focused on topping that ridge."

"Focus harder. I can't wait all day for you."

Evan brushed off the insult, just wanted to survive the field day. He was in good shape, or so he thought, but struggled to keep up with Gordon. The man was tall and

thick and confronted the northern California mountains with a grudge.

"Let's go," Gordon said, resuming uphill. "You've wasted enough of my time."

Lacking a feasible option, Evan followed. He gripped shrubs for balance and avoided rocks dislodged by Gordon's footsteps. Hiking through the chaparral felt like wading upstream in deep water. The final stretch occupied another dimension where time moved slower and gravity pulled stronger.

He crested the ridge, stooped over, and sucked wind.

Gordon rubbed his weathered face and scratched his buzz-cut in irritation. He looked older than his thirty-five years. "You gonna live?"

Evan grunted. "I'm fine." He wasn't, but wouldn't give Gordon the satisfaction.

"Then hurry up. We've got work to do."

They were field biologists. At least Gordon was. Evan remained a wannabe. His dreams of an outdoor career had never included such physical punishment. He'd envisioned days spent creek-side monitoring a bald eagle nest through binoculars, lulled asleep by dappled sunlight and rushing water.

But, three weeks into the job, he felt battered and clueless. It seemed more chain gang than scientific discovery. His tenure involved shadowing Gordon like a stray mongrel, lapping up any crumbs of information the man cared to scatter.

They descended into a canyon thick with madrone, burnt orange bark flaking like sunburned skin. The shamelessly phallic buckeye in full bloom. Evan kept pace as Gordon tore through the riparian tangle. At the base of the canyon, Gordon studied an aerial photograph then scanned a meadow with binoculars.

"What are you looking for?" Evan said.

Gordon ignored the question, approached a swale, and stabbed his shovel into the earth.

"You need help?"

"Don't flatter yourself."

Gordon extracted soil like a slice of chocolate cake. He poked around the profile with a knife, sniffed a chunk, and squeezed it between his thumb and forefinger. He jotted notes in a field notebook.

Evan watched, privy to generalities of their mission but ignorant on specifics. They were searching for sensitive biological resources: endangered species, wetlands, rare habitats. How sniffing a dirt clod helped

locate them, he didn't know. His days of college slacking returned to haunt him. Those ditched classes apparently contained relevant information.

Gordon tossed him the shovel. "Go dig soil pits five feet apart until you reach the edge of the swale. Dig down two feet and lay the profile on the ground."

Evan mustered his fortitude and began digging. He tore through the topsoil but a subsurface hardpan resisted his effort. After the last pit, he catnapped leaning against the shovel and awoke folding to the ground. He glanced up in confusion.

"Let's go." Gordon walked off, holding the shovel. "We're done for today."

Evan watched him retreat. Fatigue vanished. Defiance erupted from somewhere deep, remnants of the better man he used to be prior to his father's death. Just remnants. Nothing more.

He stood and dusted himself off.

"Fuck you," he muttered.