

TOM CANTWELL

Runner

COYOTE CLINGS to the side of a boulder twice as wide as his splayed body. He thinks he heard something down the slope, a small rock-slide or stick breaking. His fingers hold, but his boots scratch for leverage. Not that big a deal if he fell, though he doesn't want to fall. He isn't strong enough to rely on his upper body, instead squeezes the rock with his thighs and inches up like a slug. Good thing he's light. His fingers find a new crease, and moments later he's on the boulder, rising to his feet with a whoop at the sun.

This is how he spends his breaks lately, as far away from students and fellow OWL staff as possible, scrambling around for good places to sit and stare at the world. It's the eleventh day of his two-week rotation, and he has the funk, scruff, and dirty fingernails to prove it. His OWL cap, long sleeve, and zip pants are coated with sweaty grime. Today he's come two miles from camp and another mile off trail to this boulder field on the western slope of South Sister. Behind him the peak is hidden by a ridge that juts up like the jagged fin of a fish, grey basalt with red striations. His view stretches down the open slope to the first stands of trees scattered a mile or two below, then out over the thick green cover of Douglas fir foothills rolling into the western horizon. To the south he can just make out the bulging edge of the Rock Mesa Obsidian Flow, to the north the snow-dotted flanks of Middle Sister. Chipmunks chatter in the rocks. The screech of a hawk pierces the sky.

Coyote sits, unzips the innermost pocket of his daypack, and takes out his iPod and Snickers bar, his contraband. Even though he earned his earth name on his last rotation (and he loves Coyote, so much cooler than Craig), he still isn't supposed to have anything the kids don't have. He's already in trouble from yesterday, but no one will catch him up here. He sets down the Snickers to build anticipation and scrolls through the iPod, choosing Eminem and then "Cleaning Out My Closet." If he checked the number of plays, this song would be near the top, especially considering how much he's listened to it lately. Eminem sings about his mother and how sorry he is for hurting her, about the deadbeat father he wishes was dead.

The sky is clear, the sun close and bright up here above six thousand feet, though a crisp snap to the September breeze hints of autumn. Coyote wants to get high. Just one hit would do the trick, numb his body but sharpen his mind, pop the scenery to another level, turn the music into a personal soundtrack. But he left his stash in his Portland basement, not trusting himself as scattered as he is right now, not wanting the felony charges if caught with it out here among minors.

Movement down the slope catches his eye. Someone running. Long dark hair, maybe a girl, though hard to tell from this distance. She looks naked, carrying something green. Coyote rifles through his pack for his cheap binoculars, keeping an eye on her progress. She picks her way south through boulders and pink heather at the bottom of the slope, heading for an island of trees maybe fifty yards away. By the time he scopes her, she's halved the distance to the trees. She's stripped to tan long johns, the skin of her hands and face a shade darker, a bulging green tarp in her arms. Standard OWL gear. He can vaguely make out the stamped lettering on the back of her top: Oregon Wilderness Leadership.

"Shit," he says. He's got a runner on his hands

WILLOW DROPS her loaded tarp and bends over, hands on knees, catching her breath and letting a smile cross her dirty, sweat-streaked face. She's seventeen and pretty, high cheekbones and dark eyes that intimidate boys but entrance older men. They'd love her in these long johns, which she wears rather than the orange jumper packed in the tarp. She's a Warm Springs Indian who cringes inside whenever she gives her full name—Willow Morningstar—to a white person.

"I know, right?" she'll say. "Cue the flute music."

Her father is big shit in the tribe, managing partner in the casino. Sober every day of his life, he's made a fortune off whites who struggle with their limits. Willow and her older brother Billy grew up in a big ranch house with prime acreage and a view of Mount Jefferson, with their own horses and ATVs, advantages that her father would say have been wasted on her. She's stabbed a girl and been arrested twice. She's had sex with eight boys and been high on just about every drug. Her parents don't know about the silhouette of a small doe tattooed on the crease of her upper left thigh. To keep up appearances, her father sent her to a Warm Springs shaman and a therapist in Bend, though neither tried hard enough to break through her defenses. Willow only got wilder. Finally, there was the incident with her father. After that, the expensive

boarding school in Massachusetts, where she told the headmistress to go fuck herself. The hired goons from OWL won the first battle, when they dragged her from her dorm room in the middle of the night, but now Willow has just pulled one over on them in a major way. She wants to raise a victory yell, but they might be following her, and she might have heard someone else yell while crossing the clearing.

She creeps back to the edge of the trees, a mix of Douglas fir and sub-alpine fir, but the boulder field blocks her line of sight. This stand is too skimpy to stay in. She wonders how long it took them to realize she was gone, whether the first to figure it out was a staff or student. Her plan went off without a hitch, this morning tying her supplies into the tarp and tucking it into the top of her backpack, announcing she was taking the trowel when they took a water break. By the time Summer faked a fainting spell, Willow had her back to the group, tarp bundle dangling from the cord in her mouth and invisible to anyone behind her. She swung her toilet paper in one hand and the trowel in the other, and if any staff had looked away from Summer, lying sprawled in the dirt, they wouldn't have suspected a thing. Willow smiles thinking of Summer. Bulimics are the best actresses.

With her breathing back to normal, she sips warm water from her canteen, just enough to slosh around in her mouth and soothe her dry throat. Water is her first priority, and her plan is simple: follow the edge of the tree line south until she finds a creek. With so little snow left on the mountains, this might be tricky, but if she can find water she will be fine. OWL has taught her how to survive.

SINCE HE DOESN'T HAVE a radio, OWL protocol gives Coyote two options: return to camp right away or maintain visual contact until help arrives. But there is a third option: do nothing. Pretend he didn't see anything and let the brat go. No one would know. He could just eat his Snickers and stare up at the sky, stroll back to camp and act surprised.

The song is ending: Eminem apologizing to his mother over and over, right after cursing her out and saying he wouldn't take his daughter to her funeral.

Coyote thinks of Stephanie, and had hoped to finally see his big sister after so many years, but he and Uncle Robbie still couldn't find her. Stephanie, who cursed better than anyone he's ever known, who he hasn't seen since the summer before middle school, since the day he pressed her about their father.

The song ends and Coyote stops the player, pulls off the ear buds, and packs up. Coming down off the boulder, he rushes and scrapes his arm. He surveys higher ground for a place to watch all avenues of exit from the island of trees, finds his line and moves quickly but carefully, not wanting to trigger a rockslide. He doubts the girl is looking up and wants to keep it that way. Every few steps he looks down, expecting to see her bolting across the open slope to the next stand of trees. He might know who she is, remembers his first intake when he started in mid-July, a local Warm Springs Indian with the same long black hair. She was sullen and defiant and wouldn't pay attention when he showed her how to load her pack. When he moved to adjust her waist strap, she slapped his hand so hard everyone froze. Ocean took over, and Coyote never heard the Warm Springs girl say a word. Later, when they got out of the van at base camp, ready to hike their separate ways, with boys and girls to their respective backcountry camps, she wouldn't drink water.

"We can't go anywhere until you drink," Ocean said. The girl shrugged as if that would be fine, and it looked like they weren't going anywhere.

Having reached the vantage point he was hoping for, Coyote sits on loose rock and scans the trees with his binoculars. His watch reads 5:15, forty-five minutes until he's due back at camp. They'll think he's having a hard time about his mother and cut him slack for about an hour.

In the days before she ran, Stephanie didn't scream at their mother as much. She had just turned hard. So much tension in the trailer as the three of them stewed in their own sweat, cicadas in the dead grass outside buzzing as loud as the television, where Jerry Springer's security guards had to restrain his guests from attacking each other.

"Maybe we should go camping," he'd said. "Like we used to."

Probably his best childhood memories, weeks at a time in the national forests of Oregon and California, living off blackberries, Top Ramen, and the trout he caught.

"Camping," Stephanie repeated as she stared at the television. "Are you really that dumb, Craig? Camping? I hate to break it to you, Shit-for-Brains, but we were homeless."

"Don't talk to your brother that way," their mother said. "He's just a kid."

"Or what?" Stephanie said, still watching Jerry Springer, where a scuffle had broken out. "You'll spank me? Like Daddy did? Glad you remembered how to protect one of us." She spoke so calmly, so matter of fact, and then got up and left the room.

“Daddy?” their mother said, reaching for her glass of Gordon’s. “Where did *that* come from?”

Craig couldn’t let it go. He followed his sister to their room, where she stuffed things into her backpack.

“Do you remember him?” he asked her. “Do you remember Dad?”

She wouldn’t look at him.

“Stephie?”

“I hope the fucker’s dead, okay?” She zipped her backpack and slammed out of the trailer.

Craig had stayed up most of the night, staring at her empty bed and wondering what she’d meant, where she’d gone, and if he should go out looking for her.

Down below, the girl breaks from the trees. Coyote follows her progress closely, no need for binoculars with her so exposed. She’s moving south again toward the next cover, a thin line of trees extending farther south. Like a spit or peninsula, it connects to a mainland of forest. Once she gets in there she’ll be lost, though he might be able to catch her at the junction, if he hurries.

WILLOW LOVES OPEN SPACES, one thing she takes away from being raised east of the Cascades, but this open slope on the west side feels like a giant bull’s-eye, like a helicopter is about to come swooping overhead, marksmen spotting her through the sights of tranquilizer guns. Luckily she is strong and fast and the next stand isn’t far away. She covers the distance quickly and without incident. As she makes it into the trees, a rushing through the undergrowth startles her. It sounds larger than a chipmunk but smaller than a deer, and it freezes about fifty feet away. Willow catches her breath and imagines its nose working, maybe a rabbit or a fox. She has grown immune to her own smell but knows she must reek. Besides the blunt trowel packed in her bundle, she doesn’t have a weapon yet.

The fir trees are thin to her left and right but extend south as far as she can see. There’s more cover here, alder and ash with leaves turning gold, as well as dark purple berries on the plants that shelter the animal. She paid attention during the edible plant lessons and thinks these are black huckleberries. She picks one and nibbles it and thinks she’s right, though she’s afraid to eat more than a few. The animal in the bushes hasn’t moved.

“Later,” Willow says, and it’s strange to hear her own voice. She won’t be hearing it for a while, won’t be hearing any voices for a while. Hope-

fully she won't start talking to herself like a crazy on the street. It must be a slippery slope. As she walks, she wonders what's happening back on the trail, her group and the whole program probably on lockdown, all boots and packs removed. They'll be hungry and wanting dinner. Staff will be looking for her, at least organizing a search, completely surprised by her run.

After a rocky first week, she'd looked around, thought it out, and suddenly become a model student, pretending to care about earning their silly camp perks, like using the trowel instead of a stick. Staff must have thought they were doing something right. Willow told them what they wanted to hear, that she had accepted her fate and would make the most of it. But for the last six weeks she's been lying about her anger and preparing for this, disappearing a week before they send her home. She won't be earning an earth name, but whatever. Her birth name is earthy enough. She won't be stepping foot in her father's house again. The only way they can track her now is with bloodhounds. All the more reason to find water.

IT FEELS GOOD to let his body take over. Everyone said Coyote was returning to work too early, that he should take more time, but what else was he going to do? In Portland he'd felt no inclination to call Denise, the cocktail waitress he's sort of been seeing, not even to tell her about his mother, and he could only smoke so much dope, blow away so many video game monsters and enemy soldiers. Uncle Robbie made that clear the morning they woke up hungover in his one-room cabin east of Redmond, having slugged a fifth of Pendleton while burying Coyote's mother under an old juniper tree on his scrubby land; Coyote had better things to do than hang around with an old coot like him. Old coot was right. The guy was certifiable, yet he had taken care of Coyote's mother through her last months of liver failure, had probably tipped the bottle for his sister right up to the end, but better him than street scum. He had secured her final resting place by paying off the right people, had even willed his scrubby land to Coyote.

"You remember which tree I showed you to bury me under?" he asked after a breakfast of Wonder bread and bacon. Coyote nodded, though the memory was fuzzy with whisky. He had wanted to climb the juniper but was afraid of what his uncle might think. "Go on then, boy," Uncle Robbie had said. "Go live your life."

Coyote is halfway down to the trees when a loose rock gives way and

he misses the next step, rolling his right ankle and falling. As he curls to cushion the impact, angry for not focusing, he worries that a rockslide will alert the girl. His knee bangs down on another rock, and then his shoulder, but he keeps his head up and clear. There is biting pain in his ankle. He doesn't think he yelled when he fell, and after a few sharp cracks of rock against rock, the only sound is loose gravel sifting down the side of the mountain. Coyote lies perfectly still, in case the girl is looking up, the moon a faint sliver against the blue sky. His knee and ankle are scraped bloody, but the ankle hurts worse. If he lies here any longer, he will lose her. If he gets up, she might see him. After another minute he finally gets up, moving gingerly at first but faster when the pain in his ankle proves almost bearable.

WILLOW WALKS at a steady pace but pauses at the first pangs of hunger. She didn't eat before escaping, and though food will become a major issue in a matter of days, she knows the importance of staying strong and focused right now. A lightheaded feeling while sipping water confirms it. This is what Summer must feel most of the time. It's a high, Willow supposes, but not for her. She's always taken pride in her strength, knowing she can hold her own against almost anybody in a fair fight. She sits against a Douglas fir and undoes her tarp bundle, taking stock of her food: half a summer sausage, an apple, one or two portions each of peanut butter, oatmeal, couscous, and flour, all in sealed baggies. If she doesn't find water by tomorrow, she'll empty one of the baggies, stuff it with vegetation, seal it, and leave it in the sun to transpire. After water, the next thing will be fire. She has everything from her bow drill set except the bow. She nibbles on the sausage.

She'll miss out on graduation, of course, and what all the girls talk about: the first meal back in the real world. Hot pizza and cold soda. Burgers and fries. Chocolate. Willow takes a bigger bite of sausage. She wonders if OWL has notified her parents yet, and what her father will think when they do. He'll blame them and demand his money back. Shake his head when Willow's sobbing mother asks yet again why their little girl turned out like this. As if she doesn't know. When they don't find Willow in the next day or two, he'll try to wipe his hands clean of her once and for all, but her mother will beg, and he'll hire a private tracker. He'll cancel the family plans for graduation, secretly relieved not to sit in any trust circles and risk being called out, though of course he would have been ready to deny everything.

Willow rips off a last chunk of summer sausage, sips water, and repacks her bundle.

WHEN HE MAKES IT to the junction where the trees meet the larger forest, shaggy mountain hemlock mixing with firs, Coyote hobbles in silently. He has no way to know if the girl has passed. His ankle has slowed him; it continues to do so as he picks his way through patches of heather and the exposed roots of trees clinging to spare soil. Because he is so focused on the ground, he notices a pile of scat several yards away that he probably would have missed otherwise. It's tinted red, flecked with seeds, and bigger than anything he's ever produced.

Bear.

Coyote looks around at the empty forest, picks up a stick and pokes at the scat, which has hardened enough to make it at least a day or two old. Still, it's a big pile, and when Coyote keeps moving, his pace even slower, his eyes now mark the trees as much as the ground. He finds a central location and settles behind a clump of ferns crowding the base of a Douglas fir. He sips from his water bottle and uses the roots to elevate his ankle, which swells and throbs against his boot. The sun is low, the woods quiet except for birds singing from high perches. Something stirs in the undergrowth ahead.

Coyote tenses but can't see anything. He doubts the girl would be crawling around in the bushes but keeps watching from behind the ferns. For the first time, he considers what he will do if and when he confronts the girl, if OWL would even want him to. Obsidian is already mad at him from yesterday, when he helped a kid finish his rice and beans.

"Jesus, Coyote," Obsidian said after pulling him aside. "You know the rule. Awareness and responsibility. I know you're dealing with a lot, but come on. Don't get soft on me. Don't make me send you out." Obsidian is legendary for living as rough as the kids.

Coyote takes out the Snickers and finally opens it, bites into the manufactured swirl of chocolate and feels the immediate boost to his brain. He closes his eyes to savor the ingredients. There is another rule about not being alone with a student, especially not for any length of time and even more especially not with one of the opposite gender, yet here he is, far away from anyone, and here she is, picking her way through the undergrowth behind him. Coyote holds his breath and feels his body tense, ready to spring. He runs through the holds and takedowns OWL has taught him. The girl approaches through the ferns, a pinecone's throw

away, and he confirms that she is the one from intake, though somehow not the same. She seems older, dirt streaking her skin like war paint, long hair tangled and laced with bits of forest.

When Coyote throws himself at her, he is aware of two things: the shock of pain from his ankle, and a renewed burst of rustling from the undergrowth ahead.

WILLOW LANDS on her back, the man's face above her an ugly grimace, and he's taken her wrists. She brings up a knee but misses his crotch, connecting with his gut and knocking the breath out of him. He presses down on her body, sliding up and pinning her arms with his knees, clamping his hand down over her mouth. OWL cap. Vaguely familiar.

Coyote cranes his neck to study the undergrowth, clumps of thimbleberry and salal rising from the ferns, and a bear cub tumbles into the open a hundred feet away.

Coyote ducks, and Willow takes advantage of the distraction by slipping an arm out and punching him in the jaw. He hasn't been punched in a long time, and never by a girl. He wouldn't have thought one could hit so hard. His mother's swings were wild, flailing things. By the time he recovers, Willow is throwing another one that he blocks, pressing down against her body and whispering into her ear, "Listen to me. There's a bear cub over there. We need to get up a tree right away."

"Bullshit," she says.

Coyote sizes up the nearest tree and sees that it will do, for Willow at least, a young Douglas fir with its lower limbs dead and broken off, perfect footholds close enough to the ground and live branches higher up.

"I'm letting go now," he whispers. "I'll give you a boost up this tree. Ready?"

Willow nods, but when he releases her, she springs up, fight or flight, until she follows his point to the bear cub rooting around at the edge of the thimbleberry, and she drops just as quickly. She trusts OWL more than an angry sow. She slips over to where Coyote cups his hands to make a step and easily reaches the first stub of a limb, which she hugs under her armpits. She clambers to a sitting position, then realizes Coyote probably can't make it without a boost. The thought calms her. She follows his gaze to where a second black ball of fur bounds out of the salal and collides with the first. The cubs tussle, growling and clawing.

"Keep going," Coyote whispers. "I'm coming up."

"Can't you find your own tree?"

“Already looked, go on.”

Willow considers standing her ground but makes her way up to the next dead branch. She has experience in trees, the giant oak on their property where her father and Billy built a treehouse that she secretly claimed after they abandoned it. This Douglas fir is trickier to climb, but she feels confident enough to defend herself.

Coyote tries a running leap, but he can hardly run and he’s as white as they come. His fingers just graze the lowest branch and he lands awkwardly on his good ankle. He only has one more try in him. He remembers a time he and Stephie went to a party with a trampoline, remembers flying higher than his sister, who actually laughed with sincerity, and he imagines hitting that trampoline again now. He explodes up, hands locking around the branch. Swinging wildly, shaking with the effort to pull himself up, he now flashes back to a high school football tryout when he couldn’t climb a knotted rope. “No upper body strength,” the coach said. “Help,” Coyote whispers. If she will, he can hold on a bit longer.

A large stick snaps beyond the wrestling bear cubs. The sow.

Willow can easily climb more branches. She looks down into Coyote’s eyes, looking for a reason to leave him there and save her own skin, some glimmer of guilt that might indicate he knows he has this coming. But she sees only a frightened boy, the few years that separate them suddenly reversed as he looks up in desperation. She remembers him now, the guy who tried to outfit her when she first arrived at OWL. She remembers slapping his hand away when he tried to help, how the stunned look on his face turned apologetic, even though he hadn’t done anything. His jaw is red where she punched him. He is hanging there because of her.

Willow slips down to Coyote’s branch, careful not to step on his trembling fingers. One hand hugging the trunk, she squats and hooks him by an armpit. “On three,” she whispers, and they strain with the effort, Coyote’s upward momentum almost knocking her off, but she grips a gnarled crease in the trunk and he gets his arm over, then a leg. Willow hustles back up to the next branch.

They catch their breath and see that the cubs have tumbled closer, one pulling away from the other with the Snickers wrapper flapping from its mouth. Willow realizes she left her bundle on the ground, and even as she thinks it, the second cub picks up the smell and homes in on it, the first cub following. From his perch on the lowest branch, Coyote thinks he can smell the bears, the competing tang of berry, shit, and sour milk. They are the size of large dogs, and they approach the bundle with

similar black noses bobbing the air. Only now does Coyote consider that black bears can climb trees.

A deep grunt from the edge of the trees reveals the sow. From this distance she is a shadow, like a big fire-blackened stump. The shadow drops and snaps a few twigs before rising again, larger and more clearly a bear, harrumphing more urgently. Below, the cubs have begun clawing at the bundle, gnawing at the cord. Their mother begins moving forward with purpose, about two hundred feet and closing, and when she rears again for a better look, Coyote realizes she'll probably be able to swipe at his branch. He grips the rough bark of the trunk, and as he rises, putting weight on his ankle, dizzying pain lances up through his body. Climbing any higher would be risky, but so is staying here. He looks up to Willow, her eyes locked on the sow.

"What should we do?" he whispers.

Willow is looking at the mother's teats, the multiple pale spots against her dark underbelly where she's fed her cubs. The sow huffs and drops to the ground, stomping through clumps of heather a hundred feet away.

Her last night in her parents' house, Willow rode home from a party with two classmates on the baseball team. All three were drunk and stoned, and Willow told them where to park. In the back seat of the SUV, she made out with both of them and let them lift up her shirt, her bra, and play with her nipples. She didn't let them into her pants, though she did rub them through their jeans until they were hard and finally soft. They smoked another joint on the way home, where Willow knocked over a pickle jar, rummaging in the refrigerator. It shattered on the tile and she started spinning. Her father found her sitting in the pickle juice and led her up to her room, where he helped her out of her wet pants. She lifted her arms so he could take off her shirt, and when she stumbled into him, she felt how hard he was. She saw again the desire in his eyes and threw up at his feet. When she woke in the morning in her bra and panties, the smell of vomit mixed with pickle juice sent her rushing for the toilet, where she threw up again. She spent that night at a friend's house, and the next day she was on a plane to the boarding school, without a word to anyone about what had happened.

The cubs are ripping into her food bags.

"Can you climb?" Willow whispers.

"I'm not sure," Coyote answers.

The huffing sow clacks her teeth forty feet away, flashing her big yellow canines. The cubs pause and make bawling sounds. Coyote is frozen

where he stands on his branch, hugging the trunk of the tree.

“Go on,” Willow says to the cubs.

The cubs scramble to their feet and the sow charges, swatting at the earth ten feet away. She smells like a compost bin. The cubs scurry under her legs and keep retreating. The sow looks up into the tree, eyes passing from Coyote to Willow, nose working.

Coyote feels paralyzed, as if mired in a nightmare where he tries to yell but only musters a whisper. It is an effort just to manage that whisper now, words so hushed he’s not even sure Willow will hear: “Be quiet.”

Willow’s eyes are locked on the sow. “Fuck quiet,” she says. “I’m sick of quiet. Go on!” she yells. “You got your cubs! Your cubs are fine!”

The sow charges with a snort and swipes at the trunk, a blur of steely claws that connect two feet below where Coyote stands. A high-pitched cry escapes him, and though the tree is stout enough that the bear couldn’t possibly have budged it, Coyote feels physically shaken.

Willow joins him in yelling, a banshee wail that turns into a tumble of words: “Not him, it’s not him, he didn’t touch them, he didn’t hurt them!”

Light-headed, Coyote closes his eyes, clinging tighter to the fold in the bark that his fingers have been trusting.

The sow rocks on all fours, grunting and huffing, before turning to check on her cubs. Thirty feet behind her, one little head pokes out of the thimbleberry.

Coyote opens his eyes in time to see the sow regarding them before turning her attention to the remains of Willow’s bundle. She sniffs at the shredded food bags, paws at one and swipes it aside, then abruptly turns from the tree and hurries after her cubs. They dash ahead of her, colliding like magnets before breaking apart just as quickly.

Coyote settles with his back against the trunk, injured ankle resting on the branch. He is relieved he didn’t shit or piss himself; Willow would smell it. His mind reels from the encounter, playing it back. He hears echoes of his terrified cry, the sow’s bluster, and Willow’s words. He looks to the ground, afraid of the drop, then up through the branches at the first faint glimmer of a star. The sun has fallen behind the foothills, the temperature dropping along with it.

“That was crazy,” he says, watching the shadows of the bears fade into the trees.

“Sorry,” Willow says.

“Me too.” Though he’s not sure what they’re apologizing for. “You

ready to come in?”

Willow doesn't answer.

“Look,” he says. “My ankle's hurt pretty bad. I need your help.”

They sit quietly for a full minute before Willow makes her way down to his branch. He shifts and dangles his feet, hugging the trunk, and they have to hold each other for support. He expects her to keep moving, grab the branch and drop to the ground, but she settles beside him, gripping his backpack for balance.

“I'm not going home again,” Willow says.

“I know.”

In the half-light and new quiet, they sit on the branch and listen to a rising chorus of crickets, the low bass of frogs from a pond down the mountain. The rush of blood to Coyote's ankle makes it throb again, Willow shivers with a chill, but neither of them is ready to move.