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October Skies

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Chapter 1



Thursday
Sierra Nevada Mountains, California

Julian Cooke squatted down amidst the knee-high ferns, looking up at the thick canopy of pine needles and the stout straight trunks of the Douglas firs around them, before turning to look at the camera.

'Ready?'

'Yeah, I'm running,' Rose replied.

Self-consciously he patted down his coarse dark hair and adjusted the round steel-rimmed glasses on the bridge of his nose.

'There's a rich tradition of fire-side tales that come from this part of America, the wilderness of the Sierra Nevada mountain range,' he started, looking squarely at the lens of the digital camera that Rose was holding. 'They come in all shapes and sizes out here: ghost stories, stories of alien abductions, sightings of Bigfoot . . . sightings of Elvis.' Julian arched his thick, dark eyebrows and shrugged.

A trademark gesture. The shrug, the flickering expression of mild disbelief . . . an understated gesture of gently mocking cynicism.

He sighed. 'Some of the people I've spoken to here will tell you of a giant Indian spirit, as tall as a house yet invisible, moving through the woods leaving broken trees in its path. Then, of course, you'll get those who talk of a hooded monk, and others . . . a witch, seen moving in the half-light of dusk. I've spoken to several people who confidently assure me that *a friend* has even captured the hooded figure on camera, something that might just happen tonight . . . if we get lucky.'

His thick *Groucho* eyebrows arched again behind the glasses and the hint of a tongue-in-cheek smile played across his lips. He held the expression for a couple of seconds, then relaxed.

'How was that?' he asked, rubbing his cold hands together.

Rose Whitely nodded. 'Yup, it was good. A bit on the cheesy side maybe.'

'Bugger. It felt cheesy doing it. I hate these talk-to-camera pieces.'

She disconnected the camera and collapsed the tripod with a practised efficiency. 'Well, we need a set-up piece, Jules. At the moment we've got more than enough footage of you interviewing the yokels—' She shot a glance towards the park ranger sitting patiently on a log nearby and sipping her coffee from a Thermos. 'I'm sorry, Grace, I didn't mean it to sound like that.'

Grace shook her head. 'No offence taken,' she replied with a gruff, twenty-a-day voice.

Rose turned back to Julian. 'Anyway, it looked good. You looked like David Attenborough crouching there amidst the foliage.'

Julian smiled. 'Did I?' He liked that.

'Well, no, not really.' Rose looked up at the sky. Through the canopy of leaves and branches, the languid white sky was beginning to dim. 'I think we're losing the last of our daylight for shooting.'

Julian nodded. 'Yup, I think we're done.'

Grace tipped the dregs of her coffee away, screwed the cap on her Thermos and stood up. 'All right,' she said, 'we've got an hour of light. Need to find a decent-size clearing to pitch the tents.'

She bent down and scooped up her backpack, slung her rifle over one shoulder and pushed through the undergrowth. 'Let's move out.'

Julian watched her for a moment, groaning as he wearily picked up his pack and pulled the straps over his shoulders. Rose brushed past him, carrying about twice the load – camping pack, camera and equipment – and grinned.

'She *is* something of a character, isn't she?'

Rose filmed them using the night-vision filter. Julian sat next to Grace, both of them leaning against a moss-covered hump in the ground, looking out across the large clearing at the tree line around them. It was pitch black, save for the faint light intermittently cast by the moon as heavy clouds scudded across the sky.

They spoke in hushed voices, barely more than a whisper, as Julian interviewed her. And out there, amidst the trees, her microphone picked up the wonderfully atmospheric creakings, rustlings and nocturnal cries of the wilderness at night.

'You ever seen anything out here, Grace? You know . . . whilst you're out patrolling the woods?' whispered Julian, the pupils of his wide eyes entirely dilated as he stared edgily out into the darkness around them. The emerald-green grainy composition of night vision leant the scene an eeriness that Rose knew was going to look good – anticipation of something about to happen.

Grace shook her head. 'Nope, can't say I have. Get to hear a lotta things, though. The woods are as alive in the night as they are in the day . . . mebbe more so,' she replied, her breath puffed out into the cool night air.

Rose had headphones on. She could hear only what the directional mic was getting. To her it sounded delightfully creepy. A light breeze was teasing the firs and spruces around them. The swaying branches produced a chorus of conspiring whispers in the background.

'Why do you think there are so many weird sightings and urban myths around these woods and mountains?' Julian asked, cutting into the silence.

Grace measured her quiet reply. 'We got *a lot* of history here in Blue Valley. I guess when you got a bunch of history, you get a bunch of boogieman stories.' She smiled. 'We ain't so used to having a lot of history around us, not like you Brits are.'

Julian nodded and smiled.

A branch snapped out in the darkness and Julian jerked nervously, spilling coffee from the mug he was cradling in his hands.

'Uh . . . Grace, what the hell was that?' He swallowed anxiously, his prominent Adam's apple bobbing like a fisherman's float. Rose smiled at the grainy-green display in front of her.

Jules plays the fool so naturally.

'Nothing,' replied Grace calmly, 'just dead wood falling. It happens. Relax.'

'God, I hate woods,' he gasped with a cloud of vapour. 'Anyway, you were saying?'

Grace nodded. 'History. We got a lot of it here; Indian history, followed by settler history. You know Emigrant Pass isn't that far away from us.'

'Emigrant Pass?'

'It's the one and *only* way through the Sierra Nevadas. At least, it was

back in the 1850s when something like half a million people were migratin' west,' she continued. Rose listened intently to her dry throaty voice; a mesmerising monotone of midwest vowels, back-woods charm and a lifetime of Marlboros.

A perfect voice for story telling.

'They called the route a number of things back then; the South Pass trail, the Emigrant Trail, the Freedom Trail . . . I guess you'd know it best as the Oregon Trail. It was the route settlers were taking across the wilderness to Oregon. There wasn't one fixed trail though. It was a bunch of different east-west routes that mostly followed the Platte River towards the Rockies. Those trails criss-crossed each other, each one promising some kinda shortcut that beat the others. But no matter how much they all twisted and turned, they all came together in the end. They converged at one critical point.'

Grace pulled out a cigarette and lit up. The flame of her lighter flared brightly across Rose's view screen, and then it flickered out a moment later.

'Emigrant Pass. Half a million stories came through that gap in the mountains.' She pulled on her cigarette, her lips pursed and lined like a puckered tobacco pouch. 'And they was superstitious people back then. Many strongly religious types, devout types, you know? Like the Mormons, for example.'

Julian nodded.

'You ever hear the saying ''seeing the elephant''?'

'Nope.'

'It was a myth that grew up along the trail. All the hazards of that journey, the terrain, the weather, disease, crooks, Indians . . . it somehow all got rolled up into one frightening mythological beast – the elephant; the size of a mountaintop, or a storm front, or the size of a broken cart wheel. If you caught a glimpse of the elephant ahead of you in the distance it was meant to be an omen, an omen to turn back right away, and go no further. And you sure as hell did that and thanked God you saw the elephant from afar, and not up close.'

Julian looked out into the darkness. Rose instinctively panned the camera away from him in the direction he was looking – towards the tree line across the clearing. 'Do you think we'll see anything tonight?' he asked.

Grace laughed – a loose rattling sound like a leather flap caught in a wind tunnel. 'Maybe we'll see that elephant, eh?'

Julian turned round to look at the park ranger, then turned to look directly

at the camera, his mouth a rounded ‘O’, those brows quizzically arched and his eyes wide like a nervous child’s.

Rose giggled silently. Jules had the kind of comedian’s face the camera loved.