

The Carson Journals

Field Journal 18

August 7, 1983

"The obsidian point was unlike any I had seen before.

The shape was familiar.

The stone was not.

If I am right, someone carried it hundreds of miles before leaving it here.

Tomorrow we'll search the ridge."

—Dr. Eli Carson

Chapter One



Summer Begins

Medicine Lake sits high in the Cascade Mountains of far northern California, about fifty miles northeast of Mount Shasta. Surrounded by thick pine forests, ancient lava flows, and volcanic peaks, it is one of the wildest places in the state. Thousands of years ago, powerful volcanic eruptions covered the landscape with rivers of lava that cooled into black rock, caves, and fields of shiny volcanic glass called obsidian. Today, the region is home to deer, eagles, black bears, and countless other animals, while its forests and lakes attract hikers, campers, scientists, and archaeologists from around the world. To Emma and Luke, however, Medicine Lake wasn't

just another place on a map. It was Grandpa Eli's backyard, where every trail, rocky hillside, and quiet meadow seemed to hold another mystery waiting to be discovered.

Every summer since Emma could remember, she and her eight-year-old brother, Luke, spent the first week of vacation with their grandfather, Dr. Eli Carson, at his cabin near Medicine Lake in the mountains of Northern California. While most kids looked forward to amusement parks or the beach, Emma and Luke couldn't wait to return to the pine forests, volcanic lava fields, and crystal-clear lakes that surrounded Grandpa's cabin. Every visit promised something new, like a hidden waterfall, an abandoned homestead, a curious animal track, or a story from one of Grandpa's many adventures as an archaeologist. Grandpa always said the mountains were like a giant history book. "If you know how to read the clues," he'd tell them, "the land will tell you its story." Neither Emma nor Luke realized that this summer, the mountains were about to tell them their greatest story yet.

The gravel road narrowed until it was little more than two tire tracks winding through a forest of towering pine trees. Sunlight filtered through the branches in long golden beams, making the dust behind the SUV sparkle like tiny stars.

Luke pressed his face against the window. "I saw a deer!" he exclaimed.

"No, you didn't," Emma said without looking up from her notebook.

"I did! It ran behind those trees."

"It was probably a stump."

"It was definitely a deer."

Emma finally glanced out the window. "There are at least six stumps that look exactly like deer." She stuck her tongue out at him.

Luke crossed his arms. "You're just mad because you missed it."

From the driver's seat, Mom laughed. "I think you're both right. There are a lot of stumps...and probably a lot of deer."

Dad slowed the SUV as the road curved around a stand of enormous sugar pines. Ahead, tucked among the trees, sat a weathered cedar cabin with a green metal roof.

"There it is," Dad said.

Luke was already reaching for the door handle before the car had stopped. The moment the tires crunched to a halt, he burst outside. "Last one to the porch is a sleepy salamander!" he yelled. He raced across the yard, his backpack bouncing wildly behind him.

Emma climbed out more slowly. The mountain air smelled different here. It was cool, clean, with hints of pine needles warming in the morning sun. Somewhere high above them, a Steller's jay screeched.

She smiled. Grandpa Eli's cabin always sounded alive. The front door opened before anyone reached the steps. "There you are!" he exclaimed, bounding down the front steps. Grandpa Eli Carson stood in the doorway, wearing a faded canvas field vest over a plaid shirt. His silver hair escaped from beneath a well-worn tan hat, and his neatly trimmed gray beard couldn't quite hide the smile spreading across his face.

Luke launched himself into a hug. "Grandpa!"

"Easy there," Grandpa said, laughing and pretending to stagger backward. "I may be retired, but I still like all my ribs where they belong."

Luke grinned. "I've gotten taller."

"You certainly have," Grandpa replied, smiling down.

Grandpa held his hands several inches apart. "I think you've grown at least this much since spring." Luke beamed as though he'd been awarded a medal.

Emma walked up the porch steps. Grandpa opened one arm. She hugged him tightly.

"It's good to see you, Em," he said, returning her hug.

"You too."

He stepped back and looked at her. "And I see you're still carrying that sketchbook everywhere."

Emma glanced down at the worn notebook tucked beneath her arm. "I got a new one."

"I noticed." Of course, he had. Grandpa always noticed.

While Mom and Dad unloaded camping gear from the back of the SUV, Luke disappeared around the side of the cabin. "I'm going to see if the squirrel still lives in the woodpile!"

"Stay where we can hear you!" Mom called.

A second later, his voice floated back through the trees. "I found a lizard!"

Emma smiled. It had taken Luke less than thirty seconds. Grandpa chuckled, "Some things never change."

Grandpa pushed open the screen door. "Come inside," he said, gesturing to everyone.

The cabin smelled like cedar, old books, coffee, and something baking in the oven. Emma paused just inside the doorway. She always forgot how much there was to look at. Books filled nearly every shelf. Not in neat rows but in stacks. Some stood upright, and others leaned against one another like sleepy trees. Folded maps peeked from wooden cubbies. One wall displayed framed photographs of dusty excavation sites, smiling crews standing beside carefully marked trenches, and Grandpa, much younger, holding a notebook instead of the walking stick he carried today. Above the fireplace hung a faded black-and-white photograph of several people kneeling beside an archaeological dig. Grandpa looked barely older than Dad.

On another wall, framed excavation permits sat beside certificates and awards. Emma recognized one with a university seal she couldn't quite read. Near the front door stood a pair of dusty leather boots coated with reddish soil, as though they had walked through deserts, forests, and mountains for decades. Glass-fronted cabinets lined another wall. Inside sat carefully labeled teaching collections: volcanic rocks, obsidian flakes, fossil shells, stone tools, and pieces of old bottles from historic mining camps. Every shelf held neat handwritten labels.

Then Emma saw the journals. An entire wall, lined with leather-bound notebooks, stretched from floor to ceiling. Some were dark brown, and others were almost black. Several had cracked spines held together with careful repairs. Each bore a small number and a year, neatly written on the spine. She slowly walked closer. They weren't decorations. She quickly noticed that they had been used. Some bulged with folded maps. Others had scraps of paper tucked between the pages. A few were stained by rain. One looked as though someone had accidentally dropped it in mud years ago. Emma forgot about everything else. She traced the titles with her eyes. There were so many.

Journal 3...

Journal 8...

Journal 14...

Journal 22...

Journal 31...

Behind her, Grandpa carried a box of groceries into the kitchen. Without turning around, Emma asked quietly, "Grandpa..."

He looked up. "Yes?"

"How many journals are there?"

He walked over beside her.

For a long moment, he looked at the shelves instead of answering. His smile grew softer. "Enough..." He rested one hand gently against a worn leather spine. "...to remind me how much I still don't know."

Emma frowned. "I thought archaeologists were supposed to find answers."

Grandpa chuckled. "We do."

He looked toward the forest outside the window. "But every answer usually leads to two new questions."

Emma considered that. "So you'll never finish learning?"

"I certainly hope not."

Outside, Luke burst through the screen door carrying a pinecone almost as large as his hand. "Grandpa! You have to come see this giant lizard!" Grandpa laughed.

Luke grabbed Grandpa's hand and pulled him toward the porch. Emma stayed behind for just another moment. She looked once more at the wall of journals. Somehow, they felt different from the rocks. Different from the maps. Almost...alive.

Each one held a story.

Each one remembered something.

She had no idea that one of those stories would change their summer forever.

The Cabin

The old cabin felt even bigger once their parents' SUV disappeared down the winding dirt road. For a few moments, Emma and Luke stood on the porch listening. Wind whispered through the towering pine trees, making them sway gently overhead. Somewhere in the

distance, a woodpecker hammered against a tree, and from farther away came the strange cry of a hawk circling above the forest. Inside, Grandpa Eli moved from room to room.

"I'll finish packing while you two look around," he called. "Just don't reorganize my cabin."

Luke grinned. "No promises."

Grandpa laughed. "I knew I shouldn't have said anything."

Luke darted toward the back room almost immediately. Emma smiled and wandered in the opposite direction, taking in everything she had missed since last summer. The cabin looked more like a museum than a home. Animal skulls rested on wooden shelves beside polished rocks and arrowheads. A pair of antlers hung over the stone fireplace. Glass jars filled with colorful feathers lined one windowsill, and old black-and-white photographs covered another wall. Everything seemed to have a story. Luke pushed open the door to Grandpa's gear room.

Metal shelves stretched from floor to ceiling. Camping stoves, lanterns, and sleeping bags rolled tightly with canvas straps. Backpacks in every size with plastic tubs labeled ROPE, COOKING, FIRST AID, and CLIMBING.

Luke picked up a pair of heavy binoculars. "They're huge! They're military binoculars," Grandpa answered from the next room without looking up. "Bought them years ago."

Luke peered through the window. The trees suddenly seemed close enough to touch. "I can see every pinecone!"

Grandpa chuckled. "They're useful for spotting wildlife. Or people who don't want to be spotted."

Luke lowered them. "What kind of people?"

Grandpa poked his head into the doorway with a crooked smile. "The kind who don't like visitors."

Luke wasn't sure whether Grandpa was joking. Before he could ask another question, Grandpa disappeared back into the cabin. Luke shrugged and kept exploring. Rolled beside the binoculars were several topographic maps held together with rubber bands. He unrolled one across a workbench. Unlike the road maps his parents used, this one was covered in brown lines that twisted and looped over each other like fingerprints.

Blue streams crossed green forests. Tiny black dots marked campsites. A red pencil had circled several places near Medicine Lake.

"What are all these squiggly lines?" Luke asked.

"Elevation," Grandpa called.

"So... mountains?"

"Exactly. The closer the lines are together, the steeper the land."

Luke traced one of the circles with his finger. "Are we going there?"

"You'll find out tomorrow."

Luke frowned. Grandpa loved answering questions with mysteries. Nearby sat an old brass compass inside a worn leather case. He flipped open the lid. The needle spun wildly before settling north. It looked ancient. He carefully placed the compass back where he found it and continued looking through the stacks of camping gear, wondering what adventures each piece of equipment had already survived.

The Carson Journals



Across the cabin, Emma wandered into the living room again, where one entire wall was covered with bookshelves; most of them held ordinary books on geology, Native plants, volcanoes, and wildlife. But one section was different. Leather-bound journals. Dozens of them. Each one looked handmade.

"That's odd." Journal 27 wasn't there. She looked higher on the shelf. Then lower. Maybe Grandpa had loaned it to someone. Or maybe he was still using it. She shrugged. It wasn't really important. People misplace notebooks all the time. Emma continued reading the titles while dust floated lazily through the afternoon sunlight. Behind her, Grandpa entered carrying a backpack stuffed with supplies.

He glanced toward the shelves for only the briefest moment. His expression changed almost too quickly to notice.

Then he smiled. "Ready to help me pack dinner for tomorrow?"

Emma turned away from the journals. "Sure."

She followed him toward the kitchen without another thought. Behind them, the row of journals remained perfectly still except for one space. Number 27.

Breakfast

The smell of pancakes drifted through the cabin long before Emma and Luke reached the kitchen. Grandpa Eli stood at the old cast-iron stove, flipping another pancake onto a growing stack. A cast-iron skillet hissed as fresh batter spread into a perfect circle.

"Breakfast!" he announced.

Luke hurried to the table. "I thought camping food was supposed to be oatmeal."

"It is," Grandpa said with a grin. "Tomorrow."

Luke smiled. "Then today is already my favorite day."

Emma laughed as she carried over three plates.

Grandpa set a steaming stack of pancakes in the middle of the table, along with butter and a bottle of maple syrup. "Help yourselves."

Luke didn't hesitate. He dropped three pancakes onto his plate, added a thick slab of butter, then tipped the syrup bottle upside down. Amber syrup poured over the stack. And kept pouring.

Emma watched with raised eyebrows. "You know you're supposed to eat the pancakes—not drown them."

"I'm making pancake soup."

"You won't even taste the pancakes."

"I'll taste syrup."

Grandpa chuckled.

"Your grandmother used to tell me syrup was just an excuse to eat more pancakes." Luke finally stopped pouring. The pancakes had nearly disappeared beneath a shiny lake of syrup.

Grandpa shook his head. "I should've bought another bottle."

They dug into breakfast.

For a few minutes, only the sounds of forks, laughter, and birds singing outside filled the cabin. Emma glanced toward the living room, where the shelves of journals were just visible from the kitchen table.

"I was wondering something."

Grandpa looked up. "That's usually how adventures begin."

Emma smiled. "Yesterday, I noticed all your journals. There must be dozens of them."

"Fifty-three, to be exact."

"You've kept everyone?"

Grandpa nodded. "Every field season."

Emma took another bite before asking, "Why do you still write everything down? Couldn't you use a laptop or your phone?"

Grandpa leaned back in his chair. "That's a good question."

He reached behind him and picked up one of the leather-bound journals from a nearby shelf. The cover was faded and worn smooth around the edges. He rested it gently on the table. "Computers remember information." He tapped the cover with one finger. "But field journals remember discoveries."

Emma frowned thoughtfully. "I don't get it."

Grandpa opened the journal. Its pages were filled with neat handwriting, careful sketches, tiny maps, measurements, and notes squeezed into every available space. "There are plenty of digital files in the world," he said. "Dates. Measurements. GPS locations. Photographs." He turned another page. "But this..." His finger rested beside a hand-drawn sketch. "...captures what I noticed, what I wondered. What surprised me. What questions did I still have before I knew the answers?"

Luke looked over. "I thought archaeologists just dug up old stuff."

Grandpa smiled. "That's what most people think." He closed the journal carefully, taking one last look at the map.

"Archaeology isn't about collecting objects?" Luke asked.

"No," Grandpa replied. He shook his head. "It's about recording evidence." Luke and Emma listened as Grandpa continued, "If you remove something from the ground without documenting exactly where it was, what was around it, how deep it was buried, and how it relates to everything else, you've destroyed part of the story."

"So finding things isn't the important part?" Emma asked.

"Finding them is only the beginning." Grandpa folded his hands on the table. "Imagine reading a mystery novel where someone tears out every third page."

Luke groaned. "That would be awful. You'd know *what* happened."

"But not why," Emma added.

Luke stared at his pancake for a moment before another question popped into his head. "So what's the coolest thing you've ever found?"

"Good question." Grandpa looked out the kitchen window toward the forest. For a long moment, he didn't answer. Emma and Luke expected him to say gold. Or dinosaur bones. Or maybe a hidden cave full of ancient artifacts.

Instead, he smiled quietly. "Footprints."

Luke blinked. "Footprints?"

Emma looked equally surprised. "Just... footprints?"

"The best discovery I ever made."

Luke frowned. "But footprints aren't treasure."

Grandpa leaned forward. "Sometimes they're better."

The children exchanged puzzled looks.

Grandpa continued. "A footprint tells you someone was there." He held up one finger. "It tells you which direction they were traveling." A second finger. "How fast they were moving." A third. "Whether they were alone." Another finger. "If they were carrying something heavy." "And sometimes," he said, "whether they were frightened."

Emma's eyes widened. "You can tell all that?"

"Sometimes much more." Grandpa reached for his coffee. "A broken branch, a footprint, a burned campfire, a stone tool, even a single feather, by themselves, they don't tell you very much."

He paused. "But together..."

"They tell a story," Emma finished.

Grandpa smiled. "Exactly."

Luke looked down at the puddle of syrup spreading across his plate. "So... if somebody saw my breakfast..."

Grandpa laughed. "They'd conclude someone consumed an unhealthy amount of maple syrup."

"I prefer the term 'enthusiastic.'"

Emma giggled. Grandpa stood and carried his plate to the sink.

"We'll leave after breakfast" Grandpa said, turning around.

Luke's eyes lit up. "For camping?"

Grandpa nodded. "For an adventure."

Outside, the morning sun climbed higher over the pines surrounding Medicine Lake. Somewhere beyond the trees, the forest held thousands of stories. Most people walked past them every day. Grandpa Eli knew that the land was always speaking. You had to learn how to read it.

The Visitor

The dishes were barely stacked in the sink when a knock sounded at the cabin door. Three firm taps.

Emma looked up. "Are we expecting someone?"

Grandpa Eli dried his hands on a towel. "Not unless the forest learned how to knock."

"Maybe it's a bear," Luke said.

Emma rolled her eyes. "Bears don't knock."

"They might if they're polite."

Grandpa chuckled as he crossed the room. "Let's hope it's the polite kind." He opened the door. A woman stood on the porch, sunlight catching the brim of her ranger hat. Her uniform was crisp, her boots dusty from the trail, and a friendly smile spread across her face.

"Morning, Eli."

Grandpa's face lit up. "Maya Ortiz. I was wondering when you'd show up."

She stepped inside, brushing a bit of pine dust from her sleeve. "Had to finish a patrol first. The trails are busy this week." Her eyes moved to Emma and Luke. "And these must be your grandkids."

Emma stood a little straighter. "I'm Emma."

"And I'm Luke," he added quickly.

Maya smiled warmly. "Nice to meet you both."

She reached into a canvas satchel slung over her shoulder and pulled out a folded document. "I brought your permit."

Grandpa took it, glancing over the paper. "Medicine Lake Highlands," he said.

"Everything in order?"

"All approved," Maya replied. "You're cleared for the full route."

Luke leaned closer. "What's a permit for?"

Maya crouched slightly so she was at eye level with him. "It means we know where you're going and when to expect you back," she explained. "That way, if anything goes wrong, we know where to start looking."

Luke nodded slowly. "So it's like telling someone where you're going before you leave."

Emma watched the exchange carefully. Maya spoke to them as if they mattered, not as if they were just kids tagging along. Grandpa folded the permit and slipped it into his shirt pocket.

Maya crossed her arms lightly. "I figured you'd be heading out soon."

"We leave this morning."

"Of course you are." There was a hint of amusement in her voice.

Emma noticed something else too. Maya wasn't just being polite. She was... respectful. More than that. She treated Grandpa like someone important.

"So," Maya continued, "planning to follow your usual route?"

Grandpa shrugged. "More or less."

Maya raised an eyebrow. "That usually means 'no.'"

Grandpa smiled. "It means we'll see what the land tells us."

Maya laughed softly. "Still saying that, huh?"

"Still true."

Emma glanced between them. They spoke like old friends. But there was something else underneath, something she couldn't quite name.

Maya reached back into her satchel. "Oh, and one more thing." She pulled out a small envelope. "The museum asked me to pass this along."

Grandpa sighed the moment he saw it. "I was hoping they'd forgotten."

Maya handed it to him anyway. "They haven't."

Grandpa opened the envelope and scanned the letter inside.

Emma leaned closer, trying to read it upside down, but the words were too small.

Maya watched him with a knowing smile. "They're still hoping you'll come speak this fall."

Grandpa let out a short laugh. "I'm retired."

Maya tilted her head. "Nobody believes that."

Luke looked confused. "Speak about what?"

Grandpa folded the letter and tucked it into his pocket beside the permit. "Old stories."

Maya shook her head. "Important stories."

Emma noticed the way Maya said it. Not like a suggestion. Like a fact. Grandpa waved a hand dismissively.

"There are plenty of younger archaeologists who can do that now."

"Maybe," Maya said. "But none of them are you." For a moment, the room grew quiet.

Emma studied her grandfather. He didn't look like someone famous. He wore the same flannel shirt he always wore. His boots were scuffed. His hair was gray and a little messy. But Maya looked at him as if he were someone people listened to. Someone people respected. Emma felt a small spark of curiosity. What had he done?

Maya broke the silence. "Anyway, I won't keep you. I know you've got an adventure waiting."

Luke perked up. "We're going camping!"

Maya smiled. "I figured."

She glanced at Grandpa. "Take care out there."

"Always do."

"And Eli?"

He looked up. "Yeah?"

Maya's expression softened just a little. "Don't stay gone too long."

Grandpa gave a small nod. "I won't."

Maya turned toward the door, then paused. "Oh, and Emma?"

Emma blinked. "Yes?"

Maya smiled. "Keep asking questions."

Emma nodded. "I will."

Maya stepped outside, the sunlight catching her again as she walked down the path toward the trees. The door closed behind her. For a moment, the cabin was quiet.

Luke broke the silence first. Grandpa... are you famous?"

Grandpa laughed. "No."

Emma wasn't so sure. She looked at the pocket where he had tucked the letter. Then, on the shelves of journals. Then, at the door Maya had just walked through. Maya hadn't treated him like an ordinary person. She had treated him like someone whose stories mattered.

Emma felt that spark of curiosity grow a little stronger. "Grandpa?"

"Yes?"

"What kind of stories do you tell?"

Grandpa smiled. "The kind the land remembers."

Emma glanced out the window toward the forest. Somewhere out there were footprints. Stories. Clues waiting to be read. And somehow, her grandfather knew how to read them better than anyone else. She didn't know why yet. But she was going to find out.

Packing the Journals

The cabin grew quiet after breakfast. Sunlight streamed through the front windows, filling the room with warm golden light. Grandpa Eli zipped his backpack, then walked over to the wall of journals.

Luke hurried after him. "Are we leaving now?"

"As soon as we finish packing."

Emma joined them, studying the long row of leather-bound journals. There were so many. Years of adventures sat on those shelves. Grandpa stood silently for a moment, scanning the spines.

Journal 6...

Journal 12...

Journal 15...

Journal 18...

Journal 24...

Journal 31...

He reached out and carefully removed one. The leather cover was dark brown, its edges softened from years of use. He brushed a thumb across the faded number. 18.

Luke looked surprised. "You're only taking one?"

Grandpa nodded. "One is enough."

"But why only one?"

Grandpa held the journal for a moment before slipping it into the top of his backpack. "Because this one still has questions."

Emma tilted her head. "What do you mean?"

Grandpa tightened the straps on his pack. "It isn't finished."

Emma frowned. "You mean... There are mistakes in it?"

Grandpa smiled and shook his head. "No."

For a moment, he said nothing.

The cabin was so quiet they could hear the wind rustling through the pines outside.

Then he looked at both of them. "Unanswered questions."

Neither spoke. Emma wasn't sure how a journal could still have questions years after it had been written.

Luke finally broke the silence. "So... we're going to answer them?"

Grandpa's eyes twinkled. "That's what I hope."

Luke grinned. "Now this sounds like a real adventure."

Grandpa laughed as he swung the backpack over one shoulder. "The best adventures don't begin with answers. They begin with questions."

THE ADVENTURE IS JUST BEGINNING...

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