

The Carson Journals

Field Journal 24

Day 6

"I finally found Tube 47.

The cave was exactly where the map said it would be.

What I found inside...

should not have been there.

If anyone other than me is reading this... don't stop at the entrance."

—Dr. Eli Carson

Chapter 1



Mount Shasta and Black Butte

Journal 24

Rain tapped steadily against the cabin windows, turning the pine forest outside into a blur of gray and green. Water dripped from the porch roof in a steady rhythm while a cool breeze carried the scent of wet earth through the screen door.

Emma pulled off her rain jacket and hung it beside the door. Luke wiped the mud from his boots before following her down the familiar hallway. Grandpa Eli's study looked exactly as they remembered.

Tall wooden bookshelves stretched from floor to ceiling, crowded with worn field journals whose faded spines bore handwritten labels. Rolled topographic maps stood neatly in one corner, while larger maps of Northern California were pinned across the walls, covered with penciled notes, circles, and thin red lines connecting distant places.

Glass display cases held carefully arranged obsidian flakes that shimmered like black glass beneath the desk lamp. Beside them rested stone projectile points, scrapers, and other ancient tools that Grandpa had spent decades documenting. Every object had a small

handwritten tag. The room carried its familiar scent, a mixture of old paper, weathered leather, cedar shelves, and the faint aroma of pine that drifted in whenever the wind found its way through the cabin.

Emma smiled. "It hasn't changed."

Grandpa looked around the room and nodded. "I suppose not."

Luke grinned as he examined one of the display cases. "Except maybe there are even more journals now."

"There usually are," Grandpa replied with a chuckle. He walked slowly to one of the highest shelves and paused. Unlike the other journals lined neatly together, one sat by itself. Its dark leather cover looked older than the rest. The edges were worn smooth from years of use, but a thin layer of dust suggested it had not been touched in a very long time. Grandpa reached for it carefully with both hands. Neither Emma nor Luke spoke.

Even before he turned around, they sensed something was different. He carried the journal to the large oak table in the center of the room and set it down with surprising gentleness. The soft thump echoed through the quiet study. Stamped into the weathered leather, barely visible beneath years of wear, were two faded numbers. 24.

Emma leaned forward. "Journal Twenty-Four?"

Grandpa rested one hand on the cover but didn't open it. For several long seconds, he looked at it. Rain continued tapping against the windows.

Finally, he spoke. "I wasn't sure I'd ever open this journal again." The room suddenly felt much quieter. Luke's smile disappeared. Emma studied Grandpa's face. She had seen him excited, amused, thoughtful, even worried, but never quite like this. His eyes seemed fixed on something far beyond the cabin walls, as though he were remembering a place he'd never truly left.

"You've never shown us this one," Emma said softly.

"No."

"Why?"

Grandpa slowly traced a finger across the cracked leather cover. "Because some discoveries answer questions." He paused. "And others leave you with questions that never really go away."

Emma glanced at Luke. Neither of them said anything. Outside, thunder rumbled somewhere beyond the forest. "But after everything we've been through together..." A faint smile crossed his face. "...I think you're finally ready."

With careful hands, Grandpa Eli lifted the worn leather cover of Journal 24. The first page waited silently, its yellowed paper covered in neat handwriting that neither Emma nor Luke could read from across the table. At the top of the page was a single date. October 3, 1987. Grandpa looked at the words for a long moment before he began: "It started with a phone call..."

The Journal

Grandpa turned the first few pages carefully, as though the journal might fall apart if he moved too quickly. Emma immediately noticed it wasn't like the others. The earlier journals had been well cared for. Their leather covers were worn from years in the field, but they were clean, organized, and neatly repaired whenever the bindings had begun to loosen.

Journal 24 was different. Its dark leather cover was faded almost gray in places, and fine reddish-brown dust clung stubbornly to the seams. Tiny grains had settled into the cracks of the leather, becoming part of the journal itself.

Emma reached out but stopped before touching it. "Is that dirt?"

Grandpa shook his head. "Volcanic dust."

Luke raised an eyebrow. "It never came off?"

"I stopped trying." Grandpa turned another page.

The journal wasn't filled with long descriptions like the others. Instead, nearly every page contained careful sketches and measurements. There were hand-drawn maps of twisting underground passages. Cross sections showed tunnels descending beneath ancient lava flows. Compass bearings were written neatly in the margins ... *N 42° E Bearing 187°*. Elevation notes filled the corners of the pages: *Entrance: 6,714 ft; Drop: 38 ft; Main tube continues northeast*.

Emma traced one of the maps with her eyes. "It looks like a maze."

"It feels like one," Grandpa said quietly.

Several pages held detailed sketches of lava tubes. Some showed smooth, rounded ceilings that looked like giant stone rivers frozen in time. Others marked collapsed sections, narrow crawlways, and deep pits. Small arrows connected one passage to another, creating a web that disappeared beneath the volcanic landscape.

Tucked inside the middle of the journal was a folded topographic map. Grandpa unfolded it across the oak table. Thin brown contour lines rippled across the paper like fingerprints. Blue pencil marks traced a winding route over old lava flows, while dozens of tiny numbers and symbols had been added in Grandpa's careful handwriting.

Luke leaned closer. "You drew all this?"

"I had to."

"Why not just use a regular map?"

Grandpa smiled faintly. "Regular maps only show what's above ground."

Emma studied the pages while Grandpa and Luke examined the map. Something caught her eye. Near the bottom corner of one page, written in thick red pencil instead of Grandpa's usual black ink, were four words

DO NOT ENTER ALONE

The letters were larger than the rest of the notes, pressed so hard into the paper that they had left shallow grooves.

"Grandpa?"

He looked up.

Emma pointed to the warning. "What happened?"

Luke read the words aloud. "'Do not enter alone.'" He looked at Grandpa. "Why?"

Grandpa stared at the page for several seconds. His expression grew distant.

Finally, he closed the journal halfway with one hand. "Because," he said quietly, "some mistakes only need to happen once." Something inside those lava tubes changed Grandpa forever.

Medicine Lake

Grandpa carefully folded the journal closed and slid it to one side of the table. Then he reached for the large topographic map tucked inside. The paper crackled as he unfolded it, revealing a broad stretch of northeastern California. Brown contour lines curved across the page, interrupted by long ribbons of black lava flows. Blue lakes dotted the landscape, while countless tiny symbols marked caves, ridges, and volcanic features.

Grandpa smoothed the corners flat with both hands. "This," he said, tapping the center of the map, "is where Journal Twenty-Four begins."

Emma and Luke leaned over the table. Instead of explaining the map, Grandpa folded his arms. "What do you notice?"

Emma studied the maze of contour lines. "They're...spread out." Grandpa nodded but didn't elaborate.

She looked closer. "They aren't packed tightly together like they are on Mount Shasta."

"Good observation."

Luke traced a finger across the map without touching it. "There are circles everywhere."

He pointed toward several round depressions. "And these long cracks. They look like someone split the ground open."

"They do," Grandpa agreed.

Luke frowned. "I've never seen a map like this."

Grandpa smiled. "That's because you've been comparing everything to Mount Shasta."

He tapped another section of the map. "Medicine Lake isn't a mountain in the way most people imagine one."

Emma tilted her head. "It isn't?"

"Not really."

Grandpa picked up a pencil and drew a quick sketch on a blank sheet of paper. First, he sketched a tall, steep triangle. "That's the kind of volcano most people picture." He wrote Mount Shasta beneath it. Next to it, he drew a second shape: broad, gently sloping, and much wider than it was tall. "This is Medicine Lake."

Luke blinked.

"That doesn't even look like a mountain."

"Exactly." Grandpa smiled.

"Medicine Lake Volcano is a huge, shield-shaped volcanic complex. Unlike Mount Shasta, much of it spreads outward rather than rising into one obvious peak." He pointed back to the map. "Those dark areas are ancient lava flows. There aren't just a few of them; there are hundreds. Some traveled for miles before cooling into solid rock."

Emma followed one winding lava flow with her finger. "So the whole place is covered with old lava?"

"Much of it is." Grandpa nodded. "And while most people admire what they can see on the surface..." He paused and tapped the map again. "...the real mystery lies underneath."

Luke raised an eyebrow. "Underground?"

Grandpa smiled. "When rivers of lava cooled on the outside but kept flowing inside, they left behind hollow tunnels." He looked from Luke to Emma. "Those tunnels became lava tubes."

Emma's eyes widened. "So there are caves under all this?"

"Miles of them," Grandpa said. "Some are short. Some stretch for incredible distances. Many connect in ways we're still trying to understand." He rested his hand on Journal 24. "And one autumn, I decided to explore one that almost no one had ever entered."

Outside, the rain continued to fall, but neither Emma nor Luke noticed anymore. Their attention was fixed on the map and on the hidden world that lay beneath it.

Tube 47

Grandpa let the silence linger as Emma and Luke continued studying the map. The paper was crowded with notes, contour lines, lava flows, and tiny symbols. Pencil marks crisscrossed the page, evidence of years spent exploring one of California's most volcanic landscapes.

Then Grandpa extended a finger. Slowly. Deliberately. He rested it on a tiny pencil circle near the edge of an old lava flow. Unlike the other markings, this one wasn't printed on the map. Someone had added it by hand years ago. Beside the circle was a single number: 47.

Luke squinted. "Forty-seven?"

Grandpa nodded.

Emma looked closer. "It doesn't have a name."

"No."

"Just a number?"

"Just a number."

Luke glanced up. "So...what's Tube Forty-Seven?"

Grandpa didn't answer. Instead, his eyes remained fixed on the small circle. The seconds stretched longer than either Emma or Luke expected. Outside, rain drummed softly on the cabin roof. A log shifted in the woodstove with a quiet crack. Emma noticed Grandpa's hand. For the first time since opening the journal, it wasn't perfectly steady. She exchanged a glance with Luke. He had noticed too.

Finally, Grandpa spoke. "The only place I ever wished I hadn't found." The words settled over the room like the rain outside. Emma stared at him. Luke opened his mouth to ask another question, then quietly closed it again. Neither of them had ever heard Grandpa talk about a discovery with regret. Usually his stories were filled with excitement the thrill of uncovering an old campsite, identifying an ancient tool, or solving a historical mystery. But this was different. Grandpa wasn't remembering an adventure. He was remembering a mistake. His finger remained on the tiny circle. 47. It was such a small mark on such a large map. Yet somehow, it seemed to carry more weight than everything else on the page.

Grandpa slowly closed the map. "I think," he said quietly, "it's time you learned how I found it." He rested his hand on Journal 24 once more. "Because to understand Tube Forty-Seven..." He looked at both of them. "...you have to go back to the day the search began."

Grandpa sat quietly for a moment, his hand still resting on Journal 24. Then, with practiced care, he folded the topographic map along its worn creases. The paper crackled softly as each fold settled into place, as though it had been opened and closed hundreds of times before.

When the map was neatly folded, he looked at Emma. "This belongs with the journal," he said. He held it out.

Emma hesitated before taking it. The folded map felt surprisingly heavy in her hands, not because of its weight, but because she understood it was more than a piece of paper. It was the

beginning of a story Grandpa had kept hidden for decades. She slipped it carefully into the journal's inside cover.

Grandpa leaned back in his chair. "I never published what I found. I never even told my colleagues." He paused..."If we're going back...this time, you're going to help finish the investigation."

Emma's eyes widened. "You mean...us?"

Grandpa nodded. "I've spent a long time trying to understand what happened out there." His gaze drifted briefly toward the rain-covered forest beyond the window. "I think it's time for someone else to see what I saw."

Emma looked across the table at Luke.

For a second, neither of them spoke.

Then Luke's grin spread from ear to ear. "So..." he said, trying and failing to hide his excitement. "We're really going?"

Grandpa smiled, though there was still a seriousness behind his eyes. "Eventually."

He rested one hand on the weathered cover of Journal 24. "But first..."

He gently opened the journal once more. "...you need to hear the whole story."

Outside, the rain continued to fall across the pine forest, washing over ancient lava flows that had hidden their secrets for thousands of years. Somewhere beneath those forests, deep inside the volcanic earth, Tube Forty-Seven waited.

Grandpa slowly turned the pages of Journal 24 until he reached the very end. Unlike the earlier pages, this one held almost no maps, measurements, or observations. Only a few lines of handwriting. The ink had faded with time, but the words were still easy to read. Grandpa was silent. He didn't read them aloud. Instead, he gently turned the journal toward Emma and Luke.

Emma leaned forward first. Written across the page, in Grandpa's familiar hand, was a single message. *If anyone other than me is reading this... don't stop at the entrance.*

Luke read it twice. "What does that mean?"

Grandpa didn't answer. Below the message was a rough pencil sketch. It showed the opening of a lava tube as it disappeared beneath a jagged lava flow. A winding passage stretched into darkness before ending at a single circle drawn in heavy pencil.

Inside the circle was one simple label: *Tube 47*.

Emma looked from the sketch to Grandpa. "You wrote this?"

"I did."

"But..." she said quietly, "...you never went back."

Grandpa's eyes lingered on the page. "No."

"Why not?"

For a long moment, he stared at the drawing. When he finally spoke, his voice was softer than either of them had ever heard it. "Because I wasn't ready." The room fell silent. Emma looked down at the journal again. She suddenly understood something that hadn't occurred to her before. Grandpa hadn't hidden Journal 24 because he wanted the mystery to stay buried. He had hidden it because he had been waiting. Waiting until enough time had passed. Waiting until he trusted someone else to understand what they might find. Waiting until he wouldn't have to face Tube Forty-Seven alone.

Luke looked at Emma. Emma looked back at Luke. Neither of them spoke, but they didn't need to. They both knew the same thing. This wasn't just another one of Grandpa's stories. It was an unfinished investigation. And after nearly forty years... It was finally about to begin.