

Carson Journal 31

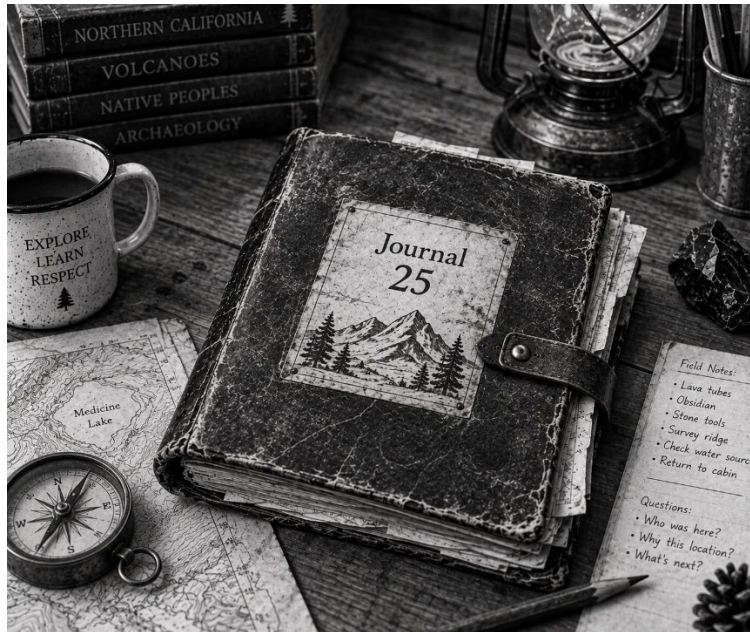
The stone markers have all been moved.

Every one of them now points toward Mount Shasta.

Someone wants the trail to continue.

I pray people never discover why.

Chapter 1



Emma stared at the journal on Grandpa's desk. 25 The number was written in black ink on a small paper label stuck to the spine. Beside it lay Journal 24.

Luke leaned over the desk. "You knew there was another one."

Grandpa Eli looked at him over the top of his glasses. "I knew there were a lot of them."

"That isn't what I said."

"No," Grandpa said. "It isn't."

Emma smiled.

Grandpa was very good at answering questions without actually answering them.

Rain tapped softly against the windows of the study. Their muddy boots were still by the back door, and Emma could smell the faint mixture of wet pine, old paper, and the coffee Grandpa had forgotten on the kitchen counter. Only yesterday, Journal 24 had led them into a lava tube beneath the Medicine Lake Highlands. They had found things Grandpa had never told them about. The obsidian. The symbols. The hidden chamber. And now another journal was waiting.

Emma ran one finger across the faded cover. "Journal 25," she said.

Grandpa nodded. "What's this one about?"

Instead of answering, Grandpa pulled out the chair across from them and sat down.
“Open it.”

Luke looked at Emma. Emma looked at Luke. Then she opened the cover. The first page held a photograph. It was old and slightly faded, with a white border around the edges. A lake filled most of the picture. Forested mountains rose behind it. But Emma barely noticed the mountains. She was looking at the trees. They were standing in the water. Dozens of them. Tall gray trunks rose straight from the lake, bare of branches and leaves. Some leaned at odd angles. Others stood perfectly upright, like dead sentries guarding something beneath the surface.

Luke moved closer. “That’s creepy.”

Emma picked up the photograph carefully.

On the bottom, Grandpa had written: *Gumboot Lake — September 1987*

“Gumboot Lake?” she asked.

“West of Mount Shasta,” Grandpa said. “Up in the mountains.”

Emma studied the photograph again. “What happened to the trees?”

“They died.”

Luke rolled his eyes. “We figured that part out.”

Grandpa ignored him.

“The question is why they’re standing in a lake.”

Emma turned the page. Another photograph. This one showed the same place, but the water was much lower. More tree trunks were visible. And beneath them was something Emma hadn’t noticed before. Ground. A strip of dark earth ran between the dead trees. She turned another page. Another photograph. The water was lower still. Now the lake looked completely different. The dead trees stood in mud instead of water, and what had looked like an underwater forest had become a strange gray grove.

Emma placed the three photographs side by side. “Same place,” she said.

Grandpa nodded.

“Different years?”

“Different years. Different seasons.”

Luke pointed at the photographs. “So the lake gets bigger and smaller?”

“Exactly.”

Emma turned the page. A hand-drawn map had been taped inside. **GUMBOOT LAKE** Grandpa had drawn the shoreline in blue pencil. Contour lines marked the surrounding slopes. A small road approached from the east. But something was strange. There were several shorelines. One in blue. One in red. One in black.



Emma leaned closer. “They don’t match.”

“Good,” Grandpa said.

Luke frowned. “Maps are supposed to match.”

“Not when the thing you’re mapping changes.”

Emma looked again. Dates were written beside each line. *June 1987; September 1987; October 1991; August 1994.* The lake had a different shape each time. She turned the page.

Grandpa’s handwriting filled both sides:

Water level unusually high after spring runoff.

Dead timber almost completely submerged.

September — water receding. Northern trunks exposed.

October — old ground surface visible between trees.

Possible channel?

Then, beneath that:

Why does the water fall so quickly?

Emma looked at Grandpa. "You were studying the lake."

"I was trying to understand it."

"Did you?"

Grandpa leaned back. "Keep reading." That meant no.

Emma turned another page. This one held a yellowed newspaper clipping. The headline was small.

FISHERMEN REPORT STRANGE ANIMAL AT GUMBOOT LAKE

Luke immediately grabbed the edge of the journal. "Wait."

Emma read aloud. "Two fishermen reported seeing an unidentified animal swimming near the western shore shortly before sunset."

Luke's eyes widened. "What kind of animal?"

Emma continued. "The witnesses described a dark shape approximately..." She stopped. "What?"

Emma looked closer. "Grandpa underlined this part." She read it. "'The animal appeared to have a long neck that rose several feet above the water before disappearing.'"

Luke slowly turned toward Grandpa.

Grandpa said nothing.

"No way," Luke said.

Emma looked back at the clipping. There was a handwritten note in the margin.

Interviewed both witnesses separately. Descriptions similar. Another clipping had been taped to the next page. Then another. They came from different years. Different newspapers. Different people.

HIKERS REPORT UNUSUAL WAKE ON MOUNTAIN LAKE

Luke grinned. "You were hunting a lake monster."

"I was investigating reports."

"That's hunting a lake monster."

"No," Grandpa said. "It is not."

Emma turned the page. A pencil sketch covered most of it. Someone had drawn the lake from the shore. Dead trees stood in the foreground. Between them was a dark shape. A curved back. A narrow neck. And a small head. Emma stared at it.

Luke whispered, "Whoa."

Below the drawing Grandpa had written: *Sketch made by witness before interview.*

The next page held another drawing. Different handwriting. Different person. But almost the same shape. A long neck above the water. A rounded back. Ripples behind it. Emma flipped to the next page. Another. This one was cruder, drawn in blue ballpoint pen. But again there was a neck. Again there was a dark body. Again the creature was moving between the dead trees.

Emma stopped. Something bothered her. She went backward through the journal. Sketch. Clipping. Photograph. Map. Another sketch. She spread several pages open at once.

Luke watched her. "What?"

Emma didn't answer. She was comparing the drawings with Grandpa's maps. Every sighting had a date. Every map had a water level. And nearly every sketch showed the creature in the same part of the lake, near the dead trees.

Emma pointed. "They're all here."

Grandpa's expression changed. Only slightly.

But Emma noticed.

Luke leaned over. "Where?"

"The ghost forest."

She turned one sketch toward him. "Here." Then another. "Here." Then she pointed to one of Grandpa's maps. "And here."

Luke looked at Grandpa. Grandpa folded his arms. Emma continued turning pages. Now Grandpa's notes became shorter.

Questions appeared more often than observations.

Why the northern shore?

Why after the water begins dropping?

Why are the reports separated by years?

What changes when the trees appear?

Then, written across an entire page:

Why do all the stories begin here?

Emma read it twice.

Luke looked around the room. "What stories?"

Grandpa didn't answer.

Emma looked up. "What did you mean?" Grandpa stood.

He walked to the window and looked out at the rain. For several seconds, no one spoke.

Finally he said, "Gumboot Lake has collected stories for a long time."

"The creature?" Luke asked.

"Not just the creature."

Emma waited.

Grandpa turned around. "Strange lights. Voices. People hearing footsteps where no one should be walking. Hunters finding tracks that disappear at the water. Fishermen seeing things move between the dead trees."

Luke's grin returned. "Now we're talking."

Grandpa pointed at him. "That is exactly the wrong reaction."

Luke stopped smiling. "Stories aren't evidence," Grandpa continued. "Remember that."

Emma nodded. "But they can tell you where to look."

Grandpa smiled slightly. "That," he said, "is better."

Emma turned another page. Blank. Then another. Blank. She frowned. "That's it?"

Luke leaned over her shoulder. "There has to be more."

Emma flipped toward the back. Most of the remaining pages were empty. Then she noticed something. The final page was thicker than the others.

"No," she said.

Luke saw it too. "It's folded."

Emma slipped her finger beneath the edge.

Grandpa turned from the window. "Emma."

She stopped. His voice had changed. Not frightened. Not angry. Serious. She looked at him. "Should I open it?"

Grandpa stared at the folded page. For a moment Emma thought he might say no. Instead, he walked back to the desk. "That's why I left it there."

Emma carefully unfolded the paper. There was no map. No photograph. No newspaper clipping. Only a compass rose drawn in black ink. North. South. East. West. A single arrow extended from the center. It pointed north.

Luke squinted. "That's it?"

Emma noticed writing beneath the compass. Grandpa's handwriting. Four words. She read them aloud.

Wait until the water falls.

Rain whispered against the windows. Emma looked at the photographs spread across the desk. The lake. The drowned trees. The exposed ground. Then she looked at the compass again. North. She pulled Grandpa's map closer. Her finger moved across Gumboot Lake until it reached the northern edge of the ghost forest. She stopped.

Luke saw it. "So when the water goes down..."

Emma finished the thought. "Something is there."

Grandpa closed Journal 25. The sound made both jump.

"No," he said.

Emma looked at him. Grandpa placed his hand on the worn cover. "When the water goes down," he said, "something becomes possible to find." Outside, the rain continued to fall. And somewhere high in the mountains west of Mount Shasta, Gumboot Lake was rising.