Old Mountain Home

Final Draft Candidate

Prologue — The Thing Beneath the Moon

The moon followed Jacob up the mountain.

He tried not to look at it.

That was difficult on a night like this.

There were no clouds worth naming, only thin scraps the wind pulled apart as soon as they crossed the ridge, and the moon hung above the trees bright enough to lay shadows across the path. Every stone had a black twin. Every branch reached twice—once in wood and once in darkness.

He climbed through both.

His boots slipped where the trail turned steep. Mud sucked at one heel and nearly took the boot. He caught himself against a pine, swore under his breath, and kept going.

His right hand hurt.

He looked down at it.

Blood had dried across his knuckles.

Not much.

Not enough.

He rubbed his thumb over it until the crust broke.

The blood was his.

That should have mattered.

It didn't.

He wiped his hand against his trousers and climbed.

Behind him, somewhere below the black line of trees, the village slept badly.

Or pretended to.

There had been lamps burning when he left. More than usual for the hour. Light beneath curtains. Light through cracks in shutters. People talking in low voices behind closed doors, because that was how people spoke when something terrible had happened to someone else.

Quietly.

As though tragedy might hear its name and come looking for another house.

He had heard some of what they said.

He wished he had not.

Poor thing.

Terrible business.

Drunk, they said.

A stranger.

A ruffian.

As though finding the proper noun for him made anything cleaner.

Somebody had said she should not have walked home alone.

He had nearly broken that man's jaw.

Nearly.

The memory made his hand close.

Pain flared through the split skin over his knuckles.

He welcomed it.

The path bent sharply uphill.

He knew the way, although he had never walked it before.

Everyone knew where the witch lived.

Nobody went there.

Those two things had existed comfortably beside one another for as long as he could remember.

Children knew which trail not to follow. Hunters knew which hollow to leave alone. Women gathering berries crossed themselves at certain stones, though half of them would deny doing it if asked. Men who laughed loudest about witches somehow never camped above the north ridge.

The old woman lived beyond that.

Not truly old, some said.

Older than she looked, said others.

Pretty once.

Pretty still.

Devil-touched.

God-touched.

Moon-touched.

The village had a name for everything it feared and no patience for deciding which names contradicted the others.

He had called her a foolish story himself.

Three days ago he would have laughed if anyone suggested he might climb a mountain after midnight to ask a hedge witch for help.

Three days ago his wife had still believed their home was a safe place.

He stopped.

The thought hit harder than the climb.

For a moment he stood in the middle of the trail with both hands hanging useless at his sides.

He could see the house.

Not this house.

His.

Their house.

The kitchen table scarred from where he had dropped the iron pan the first winter after they married. The uneven floorboard by the stove. The chair she liked because the back fit her shoulders. The blue crock she kept flour in despite the crack near its base.

He could see her sitting on the edge of their bed that afternoon.

Still wearing the dress.

He had asked if she wanted him to fetch the doctor.

No.

Her mother.

No.

The constable.

No.

He had asked what she wanted until the question itself became another thing being done to her.

Finally she had looked at him.

Not angry.

That would have been easier.

Tired.

“Stay.”

So he had.

For almost an hour.

He sat on the floor beside the bed because when he tried sitting beside her she stiffened, and he hated himself for making her do even that.

He watched sunlight crawl across the boards.

He listened to her breathe.

When she finally fell asleep, he stayed until the light was gone.

Then somebody knocked.

He had answered it.

And learned the man was still in town.

Drinking.

That had been the moment.

Not when he heard what happened.

Not when he saw the bruising.

Not when she flinched from his hand.

That.

The man was drinking.

Still.

As though the world had not changed.

As though he had not broken something and walked away carrying none of the pieces.

The Husband started climbing again.

The trees thinned.

Wind moved down the slope carrying the smell of pine and cold stone. Higher still, the ground became pale beneath the moon, patches of old grass bending almost flat in the gusts.

His anger kept pace beside him.

He had tried reasoning with it.

He had prayed.

Poorly.

He had split wood until his shoulders shook.

He had walked into the shed and stared at the axe.

Then walked back out.

That frightened him more than anything.

He did not want to be a murderer.

He knew that with certainty.

He also knew, with equal certainty, that if he saw the man's face tonight he might become one.

Those truths ground together inside him until he could scarcely think.

So he climbed.

One moment there were trees.

The next there was a clearing and a small stone house sitting near the edge of it as if the mountain had pushed it up from beneath the soil.

There was no fence.

No skulls.

No bones hanging from trees.

No black cat waiting dramatically upon the step.

He might have laughed at his own disappointment on another night.

Instead he stood at the edge of the clearing and looked.

A low roof.

A chimney.

A vegetable plot bordered with stones.

Bundles of something drying beneath the eaves.

A chopping block.

Two chairs beside the door.

Ordinary things.

That unsettled him.

He had expected something he could hate.

Something wrong enough that going inside would feel like crossing a line.

The house merely existed.

Moonlight lay across its roof.

A yellow glow showed through one window.

She was awake.

Of course she was.

He crossed the clearing.

Before his hand touched the door, a woman's voice came from inside.

“No.”

He stopped.

He had not knocked.

For several seconds he stood there with his fist raised.

Then he lowered it.

“I haven't asked anything.”

“Men rarely climb this far after midnight because they have nothing to ask.”

Her voice was neither young nor old.

That bothered him too.

He looked over one shoulder at the empty clearing.

“I need your help.”

“No.”

His jaw tightened.

“You don't know what happened.”

“I know enough.”

“Then you know why I'm here.”

“I know why you believe you're here.”

He stared at the door.

The anger inside him shifted.

It had been looking for somewhere to go all night.

“Open the door.”

“No.”

He stepped closer.

“I said—”

The door opened.

He had not seen her move it.

One moment there was rough wood inches from his face.

The next there was a woman standing on the other side.

He took an involuntary step backward.

Not because she looked frightening.

Because she did not.

Her hair was dark, though streaks of pale grey ran through it near the temples. She might have been forty. She might have been sixty. Her face had the strange quality of old carved wood—fine lines where expression had passed many times, but none of the softness age usually brought.

Her dress was simple.

No jewels.

No charms that he could see.

A narrow chain disappeared beneath the collar.

She held a mug in one hand.

Steam rose from it.

Her eyes moved first to his face.

Then to his hand.

“Who did you strike?”

“No one.”

“Yet.”

He said nothing.

She took a drink.

The smell of mint drifted between them.

That mundane little smell enraged him for reasons he could not explain.

“She was hurt.”

The woman's expression changed.

Only slightly.

“I know.”

“You know who?”

“No.”

“Then you don't know enough.”

“I know what was done.”

His throat tightened.

The anger recoiled for one heartbeat and left something worse behind.

He looked away.

The moon had climbed higher.

“Can you help her?”

The woman watched him.

“What does she want?”

He looked back.

“What?”

“What does your wife want?”

“I told you. She was—”

“I heard you.”

The words were not sharp.

That made them sharper.

“What does she want?”

He opened his mouth.

Stay.

The word was there.

He did not say it.

“She wants to be safe.”

“Did she tell you that?”

“What woman wouldn't?”

The woman's face went still.

It was a small, clear warning.

He heard it.

He was too angry to heed it.

“Do you have children?”

“No.”

“Then maybe you don't understand what it is to have somebody be your whole world.”

One eyebrow rose slightly.

“Your wife is your child?”

He flinched.

“That's not what I meant.”

“No. I expect it isn't.”

“Don't twist my words.”

“I haven't touched them.”

He stepped away from the doorway.

The clearing suddenly felt too small.

“I came because people say you can do things.”

“People say many things.”

“They say you heal.”

“Sometimes.”

“They say you know things before you're told.”

“Sometimes.”

“They say you speak to spirits.”

She looked past him.

At the moon.

“People dislike simple words when complicated ones make better stories.”

He followed her gaze despite himself.

The moonlight seemed brighter here.

Perhaps there were fewer trees.

Perhaps the air was thinner.

Perhaps he was a fool standing on a mountain arguing with a woman while his wife slept alone below.

“I don't care what they call it.”

“You should.”

“I care whether you can help her.”

Again the woman's attention settled on him.

This time she studied him long enough that he wanted to look away.

He refused.

Finally she said, “Perhaps.”

The word entered him like warmth.

He stepped toward her.

“What can you do?”

She did not answer.

“What do you want done?”

“I told you.”

“No. You've told me what happened.”

He almost shouted.

Instead he dragged a hand across his face.

“I want her to stop hurting.”

The woman waited.

“I want her to sleep.”

Still she waited.

“I want her to walk through town without hearing them whisper.”

Nothing.

“I want her to forget his face.”

At that, something in the woman's expression softened.

Only a fraction.

He saw it and pushed forward.

“I want her to wake tomorrow and have one moment where it isn't the first thing she remembers.”

The words came faster now.

“I want her to come into our house and not think of what happened. I want her to hear somebody behind her and not jump. I want her to look at me and not—”

His voice failed.

He stopped.

The woman said nothing.

He hated her for allowing the silence.

He looked down at his bloody hand.

“She flinched.”

The confession barely carried beyond the doorway.

“I touched her shoulder.”

His fingers closed slowly.

“She knew it was me.”

He swallowed.

“She still flinched.”

The anger was gone now.

Or hiding.

He could feel it waiting behind the grief.

“I want that gone.”

The woman lowered the mug.

“That I understand.”

He looked at her.

“Then help me.”

“Her?”

“Yes.”

“Or you?”

He stared.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means pain seldom confines itself to the person first wounded.”

“My pain doesn't matter.”

“That is rarely true, no matter how noble it sounds.”

He turned away from her.

Down below, beyond ridge after ridge, there should have been a faint glow where the village stood.

He could not see it.

“You think I'm making this about myself.”

“I think you came here without her.”

The sentence landed cleanly.

He turned back.

“She doesn't know I'm here.”

“I assumed.”

“She shouldn't have to.”

The woman's eyes narrowed.

“Explain.”

“She's been through enough.”

“So you chose for her.”

“I'm trying to help her.”

“I know.”

Something in the way she said it chilled him more than accusation would have.

He rubbed at the blood on his knuckles again.

“I can't sit there.”

“Why?”

He laughed once.

There was nothing amused in it.

“You really have to ask?”

“Yes.”

“Because he is down there.”

There it was.

The anger stepped back into the clearing.

The woman's gaze sharpened.

“He?”

“The man.”

“You know where he is?”

“Last I heard.”

“And what would you do if you stood before him?”

His mouth opened.

Nothing came.

She watched.

He looked beyond her into the house.

Firelight.

A table.

Shelves.

Bundles of dried plants hanging from beams.

Ordinary.

Safe.

Warm.

The sort of room his wife should have been sitting in tonight.

Not curled on their bed afraid of footsteps.

“I don't know.”

The lie felt heavy in his mouth.

The woman heard it.

He knew she did.

She leaned one shoulder against the doorframe.

“What do you want from me?”

“Strength.”

The answer surprised him by how quickly it came.

The woman did not move.

He continued.

“I want to know I can stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“Anyone.”

“Anyone doing what?”

“Hurting her.”

“And how much strength would be enough?”

He shook his head.

“I don't know.”

“Enough to stop one man?”

“Yes.”

“Two?”

“If I had to.”

“Ten?”

His irritation returned.

“What is this?”

“A question.”

“It's foolish.”

“Then answer it easily.”

He glared at her.

She waited.

He looked toward the moon without meaning to.

Ten men.

If ten men tried to hurt her?

He pictured the house.

The door breaking.

Hands reaching.

Her scream.

His stomach turned.

“All of them.”

The woman became very quiet.

“So there is no amount.”

“I didn't say that.”

“You did.”

“No. I said I want to be able to protect my wife.”

“From one man.”

“From anyone.”

“From anything?”

“If I can.”

“And if protection requires harm?”

He looked at her.

“Then so be it.”

The words came out colder than he intended.

The woman looked past him again.

The moonlight crossed her face.

For the first time, he saw something almost like worry.

That gave him hope.

If she was worried, then there was something real here to worry about.

“You can do it.”

She did not answer.

“You can.”

“There are things I can ask.”

“Ask who?”

“The better question is whether you understand what you intend to offer in return.”

“I have money.”

She almost smiled.

It vanished before becoming one.

“No.”

“Food. Work. Whatever you want.”

“I don't want your chickens.”

Despite everything, the absurdity caught him.

He snorted.

Almost a laugh.

The woman noticed.

“So you still know how.”

His face hardened again.

“How what?”

“To be something other than angry.”

“I'm not angry.”

This time she did smile.

He looked at his bleeding knuckles.

“All right.”

“Say it.”

“What?”

“Say that you're angry.”

He stared at her.

“This is foolish.”

“Then humor the foolish witch on the mountain.”

He hesitated.

“I'm angry.”

“At whom?”

“The man who hurt her.”

“Only him?”

He thought of the voices behind curtains.

Shouldn't have walked alone.

Drunk.

A stranger.

Terrible business.

He thought of the tavern keeper who had apparently let the bastard continue drinking.

The constable saying they would handle it in the morning.

Morning.

As though justice kept office hours.

“Mostly.”

The woman's expression changed.

A tiny thing.

But he saw it.

“Mostly?”

“People should have stopped him.”

“Before?”

“Yes.”

“Could they?”

“Somebody always knows.”

“That isn't an answer.”

“They saw what he was.”

“Did you?”

He froze.

The question struck somewhere deep.

He had seen the man once.

Maybe twice.

A stranger passing through.

Loud.

Drunk.

Nothing he had thought worth remembering.

The rage turned inward for half a heartbeat.

It was unbearable there.

He shoved it back out.

“If I'd known—”

“But you didn't.”

“No.”

“Yet you believe others should have.”

“Someone served him.”

“That is not the same as knowing what he would do.”

“You weren't there.”

“No.”

“Then stop defending them.”

The woman's face hardened.

“I am defending no one.”

“It sounds like it.”

“I am trying to learn what will happen if I put power into your hands.”

He stepped toward her.

“I would protect her.”

“I believe you.”

That stopped him.

The answer was immediate.

No sarcasm.

No doubt.

“I believe,” she continued, “that if the mountain itself fell toward your home tonight, you would put your shoulders beneath it.”

He stared at her.

“I believe you would die for her without hesitation.”

His throat tightened.

“Then you understand.”

“No.”

The word was gentle.

“That is what frightens me.”

Wind moved through the clearing.

The herbs under the eaves whispered against one another.

He looked past her into the warm house again.

“What are you?”

The woman followed his eyes.

“Cold, at the moment.”

“I'm serious.”

“So am I.”

“Are you a witch?”

“Sometimes.”

“That's not an answer.”

“It is the answer your village understands.”

“And the answer you understand?”

She tilted her face toward the moon.

The pale light caught in her eyes.

“I serve.”

He followed her gaze.

“The moon?”

“Yes.”

He should have laughed.

He did not.

Maybe because he was exhausted.

Maybe because he had already climbed a mountain to ask a witch for magic.

There was little dignity left to preserve.

“The moon doesn't care about us.”

The woman looked at him.

“Why should it?”

He frowned.

“You just said—”

“I said I serve it. I did not say it exists to serve you.”

“Then why would it help?”

“Sometimes help is what happens when purposes agree.”

He did not understand.

She saw that.

“The moon pulls oceans without knowing the names of ships.”

“That's tides.”

“Yes.”

“You make it sound mystical.”

“You make it sound less wondrous because you have a word for it.”

He almost argued.

Then decided he did not care.

“Can it help my wife?”

The Priestess looked at him for a long time.

“It may.”

“Can it give me strength?”

“Yes.”

His heart beat once, hard.

“Enough?”

“There is always enough power to ruin yourself.”

He stared at her.

“I won't.”

“Everyone says that before possessing enough.”

“I know what I want.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Then say it carefully.”

He looked toward the darkness beyond the clearing.

He pictured his wife sleeping.

He hoped she was sleeping.

He pictured her waking without fear.

Walking into town without whispers following.

Laughing again.

Trusting his touch.

He pictured the man in the tavern.

The image entered uninvited.

For one savage instant he saw hands around the man's throat.

He pushed it away.

“I want her safe.”

The Priestess watched him.

“I want what happened to stop following her.”

Silence.

“I want the memory to fade.”

The woman gave the smallest nod.

“I want strength enough that nobody can ever do that to her again.”

The Priestess's eyes did not leave his.

“And the man?”

The question waited between them.

He felt his pulse in the cuts across his knuckles.

“What about him?”

“You climbed the mountain with his face in your mind.”

“No.”

Another lie.

Smaller than the first.

Worse.

The Priestess looked at him.

He looked back.

Neither spoke.

He could hear the fire inside her house.

A soft crack.

Wood settling.

The wind dropped.

Even the herbs beneath the eaves became still.

The moonlight seemed to gather.

He saw the man laughing.

He saw his wife's bruised face.

He saw her flinch.

His jaw tightened.

“I want him never to hurt anyone again.”

The Priestess closed her eyes.

Only for a moment.

When she opened them, he saw that she was afraid now.

Not of him.

Of something beyond him.

Something she had finally recognized too late.

He mistook it for reluctance.

“Please.”

That changed her.

Not much.

Enough.

He had not begged anyone since he was a boy.

He hated how the word sounded.

He said it again anyway.

“Please.”

The Priestess looked past him to the path descending toward the village.

Then toward the moon.

Then back to the man standing at her door.

Love was there.

She could see it plainly.

Grief too.

Devotion.

Fear.

And rage.

So much rage.

But rage could pass.

Couldn't it?

Grief changed men.

Love could steady them.

That was what she had been taught.

Power followed purpose.

Purpose could be guided.

She had turned away desperate people before.

Cruel people.

Greedy people.

People who wanted the Moon to make them feared.

This man wanted his wife safe.

That distinction mattered.

She told herself it mattered enough.

“One condition.”

He stepped closer.

“Anything.”

“Do not say that.”

He swallowed.

“What condition?”

“If we do this, you listen to me.”

“I will.”

“You do not reach for what you are given until I tell you.”

“I won't.”

“You do not leave until I tell you the rite is finished.”

“I understand.”

“And if I stop—”

She hesitated.

The hesitation should have stopped her.

For the rest of her very long life, she would remember that.

“If I stop,” she continued, “you stop.”

He nodded.

“I swear.”

The Priestess studied him one last time.

She should have asked him to go home.

She should have sent him back to sit beside his sleeping wife.

She should have told him helplessness was not shame.

She should have told him that a man's inability to undo another person's pain did not make him weak.

She should have asked the one question she had somehow failed to ask.

Not what he wanted for his wife.

Not what he wanted from the Moon.

Not what he would do to protect her.

She should have asked what he wanted to do to the man.

Instead, she stepped backward.

The door opened wider.

Warm firelight spilled across the threshold and touched his boots.

Beyond the roof, the moon stood pale and immense over the mountain.

“Come inside,” said the Priestess.

And he did.

CHAPTER 1

THE WRONG ROAD

By four-thirty, Daniel Mercer had become personally offended by the clouds.

It was not a rational position.

He knew this.

Clouds were under no obligation to respect a six-hour drive, two tanks of gas, a motel reservation he had already canceled, or the very expensive collection of glass currently occupying most of the back of his Subaru.

They were clouds.

They lacked malice.

This did not prevent him from glaring at them.

“You weren't even in the forecast.”

The clouds continued east without apology.

Daniel lowered the binoculars.

The overlook had looked perfect on paper.

High elevation. Southern horizon mostly unobstructed. Minimal light pollution. A narrow gravel access road that did not appear to pass through anyone's private property. Better still, the satellite images showed a bald shoulder of mountain with almost nothing above the tree line.

He had been planning this particular trip for three weeks.

The weather service had promised him clear skies.

Two astronomy apps had promised him clear skies.

A third had been less optimistic, but Daniel had decided the third one was being pessimistic and therefore probably wrong.

The third one was currently winning.

He stood beside the open hatchback and watched a gray wall consume the exact stretch of sky where the moon would rise.

“All right.”

He checked his watch.

Still time.

Not much, but time.

The lunar occultation itself wasn't the only reason he had come. He could photograph the moon from home. He had photographed the moon from

home so many times that his next-door neighbor had once asked whether NASA was paying him rent.

Tonight was about the atmosphere.

There had been rain earlier in the week. Cold air had followed. If the forecast had been right, the combination should have left the mountain air unusually clean.

Sharp seeing wasn't everything.

Sometimes the air itself made the photograph.

A trace of haze could soften distant ridges into layers. A little ice high in the atmosphere could put a halo around the moon. Moisture along the valley could hold moonlight like smoke.

You could plan for position.

You could plan for equipment.

You could plan for exposure.

The sky still had to decide whether it wanted to cooperate.

Daniel looked again at the clouds.

Apparently this patch of sky did not.

He pulled his phone from his jacket and opened the map.

The signal indicator showed one bar.

Then none.

Then one again.

“Excellent.”

He zoomed out.

The road he had taken curled along the western side of the mountain before dropping toward the highway.

There was another ridge to the north.

Higher.

Possibly high enough to get him above the worst of the low cloud.

There appeared to be a road.

Maybe.

The map showed a thin gray line branching from the county route, climbing northwest, then simply ending.

Daniel frowned.

He zoomed in.

The gray line vanished.

He zoomed out.

There it was again.

“That's useful.”

He tried satellite view.

The phone spun for several seconds and replaced half the screen with blurry green squares.

Somewhere inside the blur, a road might have existed.

Or a logging trail.

Or a stream.

Or nothing.

Daniel looked at the sky.

Then at the equipment in his car.

Then at the road.

There were people who took up hobbies because they wished to relax.

Daniel had never understood them.

He shut the hatch.

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Ten minutes later, Daniel began to question whether what he had found was technically a road.

It was certainly committed to the idea.

Two broad tracks climbed through the trees over a bed of stone packed so hard and smooth that generations of wheels had apparently accomplished what the highway department had not.

There were drainage cuts.

Old retaining walls.

Here and there, fitted stone ran along the downhill edge with a degree of workmanship nobody had invested in a logging trail by accident.

But there was no asphalt.

No fresh gravel.

No reflector posts.

No utility lines following it into the mountains.

Daniel slowed.

His phone insisted he had left the mapped route three minutes ago.

The little blue position marker floated approximately sixty yards east of him in what appeared to be uninterrupted forest.

He looked through the windshield.

Road.

He looked at the phone.

Trees.

“One of you is lying.”

The Subaru's navigation system had no stronger opinion. It showed him crawling through unnamed terrain.

Daniel kept going.

The road climbed.

Stone walls appeared along the roadside.

Not decorative landscaping.

Old walls.

Waist-high in places, collapsed in others, running straight through trees thick enough that whoever laid those stones had been dead a very long time.

Then came the foundation of a building.

Another farther uphill.

A chimney standing without a house.

The mountain had been inhabited once.

That was not especially unusual. Appalachia was full of places the economy had finished with before maps had finished recording them—mining settlements, timber camps, farmsteads, little communities reduced to cemeteries and cellar holes.

Still, Daniel had never heard of anything up here.

A bend opened briefly toward the east.

The clouds were thinning.

He grinned.

“See? That's all I asked.”

The road narrowed.

He almost turned around.

Then pale light broke through the cloud deck ahead.

The moon.

Not fully risen yet.

Just the upper edge, white against darkening blue, balanced perfectly between two distant ridges.

Daniel's hands tightened on the wheel.

“Oh, that's disgusting.”

He meant it affectionately.

He pulled over.

There was barely enough room.

Hazards on.

Parking brake.

He was out of the car before the engine had completely settled.

Tripod.

Camera.

Long lens.

He worked quickly but not hurriedly.

There was a difference.

Hurry made you stupid.

The moon continued rising.

He extended the tripod legs, leveled the head, mounted the lens and looked through the viewfinder.

The ridge beneath the moon was black with pine.

A second ridge lay behind it, softer and blue.

The moon sat precisely in the saddle between them.

Daniel adjusted focus.

A bird crossed the frame.

He fired.

Three shots.

The bird was gone.

He checked the image.

Its silhouette crossed the lower third of the moon.

Daniel laughed.

“Of course you did.”

Absurd luck.

Not impossible.

Nothing mystical.

A bird flew where a bird flew.

He happened to be ready.

Still.

Nice.

Very nice.

The cloud bank shifted behind him.

More gray advancing.

“Right. Fine.”

He packed quickly.

If the road kept gaining elevation, he might still get twenty good minutes before the clouds swallowed everything.

He climbed back into the car.

The phone map had frozen.

He tapped it.

Nothing.

The blue marker remained among the trees.

Daniel tossed the phone onto the passenger seat.

The road itself seemed fairly committed to existing.

That would have to do.

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The first occupied house appeared fifteen minutes later.

Daniel almost drove past it.

Gray boards. Stone chimney. Split-rail fence.

Smoke rose steadily from the chimney, and a woman in an apron stood beside a washtub behind the house.

She looked up when the Subaru passed.

Then simply stopped.

Daniel lifted one hand.

The woman did not.

Her stare followed the car until trees blocked her from view.

“That went well.”

Another house appeared.

Then a barn.

Two horses watched from behind a fence.

A man splitting wood straightened as Daniel went by and leaned on his axe.

Daniel slowed further.

The man stared at the Subaru.

Then at Daniel.

Not hostile.

Just intensely interested.

Daniel waved.

After a moment, the man raised one hand.

Progress.

The road began descending.

The forest opened.

And there, folded into a narrow valley between steep mountain shoulders, was a town.

Daniel stopped the car.

Actually stopped.

Middle of the road.

There was nobody behind him.

He stared through the windshield.

“How the hell did I miss that?”

A few dozen houses occupied the valley floor and climbed the gentler slopes. More roofs showed through trees beyond them. A white church steeple stood near the center. Several narrow streets ran between closely packed buildings, then faded into lanes climbing the hills.

Nothing was abandoned.

Smoke rose from chimneys everywhere.

Laundry moved on lines.

People crossed streets.

A horse pulled a small wagon past the church.

Daniel picked up his phone.

No service.

The map refreshed.

According to it, he was standing halfway up an uninhabited mountain.

He looked at the town.

Then the map.

Then the town.

“Okay.”

He took a photograph through the windshield.

That worked.

He tried dropping a pin.

The app thought about it.

Then crashed.

“Very okay.”

He put the car into gear.

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The strangest part was not that the town looked old.

Plenty of places looked old.

The strange part was that nothing modern had been layered on top of it.

No wires crossed the streets.

No service drops ran to the houses.

No parked cars.

No road signs.

No fluorescent glow behind a store window.

No antennas that Daniel could see.

There were glass panes, metal roofing, bicycles, a hand pump beside one building, and enough machine-made objects to make the place obviously inhabited by people who had not been frozen in 1850.

But the usual accumulated clutter of the modern world simply wasn't there.

It did not look historical.

Historical places were too clean about being historical.

This looked lived in.

A boy of perhaps twelve stood beside the road with a wooden crate in his arms and stared at Daniel's car.

On his wrist was a cheap digital watch.

Daniel noticed because it was the most modern object he had seen since entering the valley.

The boy noticed Daniel noticing it.

He covered the watch with his sleeve.

Daniel drove on.

“What the hell are you people doing up here?”

The boy, fortunately, could not hear him.

People noticed the car.

Everyone noticed the car.

Conversations stopped.

Heads turned.

A horse shied when Daniel rolled past and he immediately slowed to walking speed.

The man holding its bridle looked irritated at the horse rather than Daniel.

“Easy, Nell. You've seen one before.”

Daniel heard that through his open window.

He looked at the man.

The man looked back.

“You lost?”

Daniel considered several possible answers.

“Probably.”

The man nodded as though that explained everything.

“Straight on.”

“To what?”

“Town.”

Daniel looked around.

“Aren't I in it?”

The man thought about that.

“Center, then.”

“Does the town have a name?”

Now the man looked at him strangely.

“Knight's Vale.”

Daniel repeated it.

“Knight's Vale.”

“That's what I said.”

“Sorry. My map says there's nothing here.”

The man's expression suggested that whatever shortcomings Daniel's map possessed were not Knight's Vale's responsibility.

“Seems wrong.”

“That's sort of my concern.”

The horse pulled at the reins.

The man patted its neck.

“Straight on.”

“Thanks.”

Daniel started forward.

Then stopped again.

“Is there somewhere I can get a room?”

The man pointed down the road.

“Emily's.”

That apparently settled it.

“Emily's what?”

But the horse had decided the conversation was over.

Daniel continued downhill.

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The center of Knight's Vale occupied a shelf of flatter ground around the church and a broad public well.

The buildings stood close together there.

A general store.

A smithy that appeared to be functioning.

A narrow building with a painted sign advertising a physician.

Several shops whose purposes Daniel could not determine at a glance.

And one large two-story house with a deep porch and a smaller sign beside the door:

ROOMS

MEALS

No name.

He parked off the road beside a hitching rail and shut off the engine.

Silence arrived with surprising force.

No engine.

No distant traffic.

No transformer hum.

No air conditioner.

No aircraft overhead.

Only wind, a horse stamping somewhere behind him, an axe striking wood, and voices farther down the street.

Daniel sat for several seconds.

Then his phone chimed.

He looked at it.

The screen displayed:

NO SERVICE

“Thank you.”

He got out.

Three people across the road watched him.

One was openly examining the Subaru.

Daniel locked it.

That action earned another stare.

He took his camera bag from the back, thought better of carrying several thousand dollars' worth of equipment into a building full of strangers, put it back, and locked the car again.

The front porch creaked beneath his boots.

There was a bell beside the door.

There was also a handle.

Daniel chose technology.

The door opened.

Warm air hit him first.

Then wood smoke.

Then coffee.

The room beyond was something between an inn, dining room, tavern and the living room of a large house that had gradually accepted it would never again belong entirely to the people who lived in it.

Heavy tables filled one side.

A long counter occupied the other.

Oil lamps hung from hooks overhead, unlit for the moment. Late daylight came through the windows.

A woman behind the counter looked up.

Daniel stopped.

Not because she was beautiful.

She was, in the unhelpful way that certain people remained beautiful after familiarity should have reduced them to ordinary proportions.

But that wasn't what stopped him.

It was her expression.

She looked at him as though strangers were simultaneously unusual and not remotely surprising.

Her eyes moved from his face to the window.

To the Subaru.

Back to him.

“You came in that?”

Daniel glanced behind himself.

“That was the plan.”

“How far?”

“Depends whether my GPS is lying.”

“It is.”

Daniel paused.

“Well. Good. We agree on something.”

Something almost became a smile.

Almost.

“Need a room?”

“Yes.”

“How many nights?”

“One.”

The almost-smile disappeared.

“Then leave early.”

Daniel blinked.

“I haven't actually checked in yet.”

“You can still leave early.”

“Is this a hospitality tradition?”

This time he got the smile.

Small.

Brief.

Worth earning.

“No.”

She set down the cloth she had been using on the counter.

“Emily.”

“Daniel Mercer.”

They shook hands.

Her grip was firm.

Daniel glanced around.

“Someone up the road said to come to Emily's.”

“Then he was probably trying to be helpful.”

“Is this Emily's?”

“Apparently.”

“Does it have another name?”

“No.”

Daniel nodded.

“Efficient.”

“People know where it is.”

“I didn't.”

“You're not from here.”

“Strong detective work.”

Another almost-smile.

Daniel liked her immediately.

That tended to make him suspicious of his judgment.

Emily opened a ledger.

Paper.

Of course it was paper.

“Cash?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

That surprised him.

“You get enough strangers through here to use dollars?”

“Enough.”

“How?”

Emily looked toward the front door.

“The road.”

Daniel waited.

That appeared to be the complete answer.

He pulled out his wallet.

Her attention snagged briefly on the credit cards.

Not confusion.

Recognition.

Then disinterest.

“You don't take Visa.”

“Not successfully.”

Daniel laughed.

Emily quoted a price low enough that he asked whether she had misunderstood how much a dollar was worth.

She had not.

When he paid, she counted the bills with no trouble at all and slid a key across the counter.

Actual key.

Brass.

Stamped 4.

“Top of the stairs. Left.”

“Dinner?”

“Six.”

Daniel checked his watch.

“You have a clock?”

Emily pointed behind him.

A mechanical wall clock ticked above the dining room door.

“I deserved that.”

“Yes.”

He pocketed the room key.

“What time does it get dark here?”

Emily looked at him.

“Same time it gets dark everywhere else.”

“I am doing remarkably well.”

“You haven't been here ten minutes.”

“Plenty of time to recover.”

That time she laughed.

Quietly.

Then somebody outside shouted.

Not alarm.

A name.

Another voice answered.

Emily's laughter stopped.

She looked toward the window.

Daniel followed her gaze.

Across the street, two men were carrying long guns.

Neither was hunting dressed.

Another man came from between two buildings with a rifle over his shoulder.

People who had been lingering outside began going home.

A woman called two children off the road.

The change was fast enough that Daniel noticed it before he understood it.

“Something happening?”

Emily picked up the cloth again.

“Dusk.”

He waited.

She continued wiping the counter.

“That usually happens daily.”

“Here too.”

“And the rifles?”

“Also.”

Daniel looked outside again.

Wooden shutters were being pulled closed over a house across the road.

Not decorative shutters.

Heavy ones.

A man dropped a crossbar into brackets behind a shop door.

Daniel turned back.

“Okay.”

Emily met his eyes.

“Go upstairs before dark.”

There was no humor now.

“Why?”

“Because you're leaving early.”

“That hasn't explained anything either time.”

The front door opened.

Four men came in.

Cold air followed them.

Most greeted Emily by name.

One took a table near the window but did not remove his coat.

Another leaned a rifle carefully against the wall.

An older man with a weathered face walked straight to the counter.

“North trail.”

Emily's hand stopped.

“What about it?”

“Tracks.”

“How many?”

“Seven, maybe.”

A younger man behind him said, “Maybe more.”

The older man gave him an irritated look.

“Seven.”

Daniel glanced from one to the other.

“Sorry.”

Nobody looked at him.

He tried again.

“Seven what?”

The older man finally turned.

“Wolves.”

Daniel looked at the rifles.

Then at Emily.

“Wolves.”

“Yes,” she said.

There were parts of Appalachia where wolves had become a subject of rumor, misidentification and very enthusiastic argument.

There were not, to Daniel's knowledge, parts where seven of them routinely caused an entire town to barricade itself before supper.

“Actual wolves?”

The older man stared at him.

“No. Decorative ones.”

Daniel nodded.

“Fair.”

The younger man snorted.

Emily did not.

Daniel gestured toward the men gathering near the windows.

“You do this every night?”

“When we need to.”

“How often do you need to?”

Nobody answered immediately.

That was interesting.

The older man checked the rifle he'd leaned against the wall.

Daniel looked at him.

“How many wolves are there?”

“Seven.”

“Exactly?”

The younger man said, with an odd trace of pride, “Used to be twelve of the bastards. We got six.”

“Five.”

The correction came from the man at the window.

The younger man turned.

“What?”

“We got five. There are seven left.”

A pause.

“Oh.”

Daniel looked between them.

Neither appeared embarrassed by the arithmetic.

“You've killed five wolves.”

“Over the years.”

“How many years?”

The older man's brow furrowed.

“A while.”

“How long is a while?”

Another silence.

Not secretive.

Daniel had spent enough time around people withholding information to recognize that.

This was different.

They seemed to be looking for an answer.

And not finding one.

The younger man finally shrugged.

“Long enough.”

A man near the fire said, “Plus the Beast.”

The room changed.

Only slightly.

Daniel noticed Emily go still.

The older guard scowled.

“Beast is dead.”

“You don't know that.”

“Nobody's seen it.”

“That's because it stays high.”

“Or because it crawled off and died from what they did to it.”

“What who did?”

The man by the fire frowned.

Nobody answered.

The older guard grunted.

“Exactly.”

Daniel looked at Emily.

She had gone pale.

Not frightened.

Something stranger than frightened.

As though a word had opened a door in her head and she was trying not to look through it.

“The Beast?” Daniel asked.

Emily picked up the coffee pot.

“You ask a lot of questions.”

“I've been told.”

“Have you ever been told to stop?”

“Frequently.”

She poured coffee for the guards.

Daniel watched her.

“Was any of it effective?”

“No.”

“Shame.”

The man at the window chuckled.

Emily set the pot down.

“Upstairs, Daniel.”

He looked outside.

The valley had darkened quickly.

Mountain shadow already covered the eastern houses.

Someone farther down the street was hammering something into place.

Doors closing.

Bars dropping.

Shutters meeting.

Daniel felt the first genuine unease.

“What happens if I stay down here?”

“You get in the way.”

The answer came immediately.

That he understood.

“Okay.”

He started toward the stairs.

Emily called after him.

“Daniel.”

He turned.

Her face was serious.

“Once you're in your room, stay there.”

“Even if—”

“Stay there.”

He stopped joking.

“All right.”

“Don't go to the porch.”

“All right.”

“Don't open a window because you hear something outside.”

Daniel looked toward the darkening glass.

“What would I hear?”

Emily's eyes held his.

“Sometimes you'll hear things.”

A howl came from somewhere far up the valley.

Every conversation in the room stopped.

The sound was low.

Long.

Too distant for Daniel to judge size.

Another answered from a different mountain.

Then silence.

Emily whispered:

“Upstairs.”

This time he went.

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