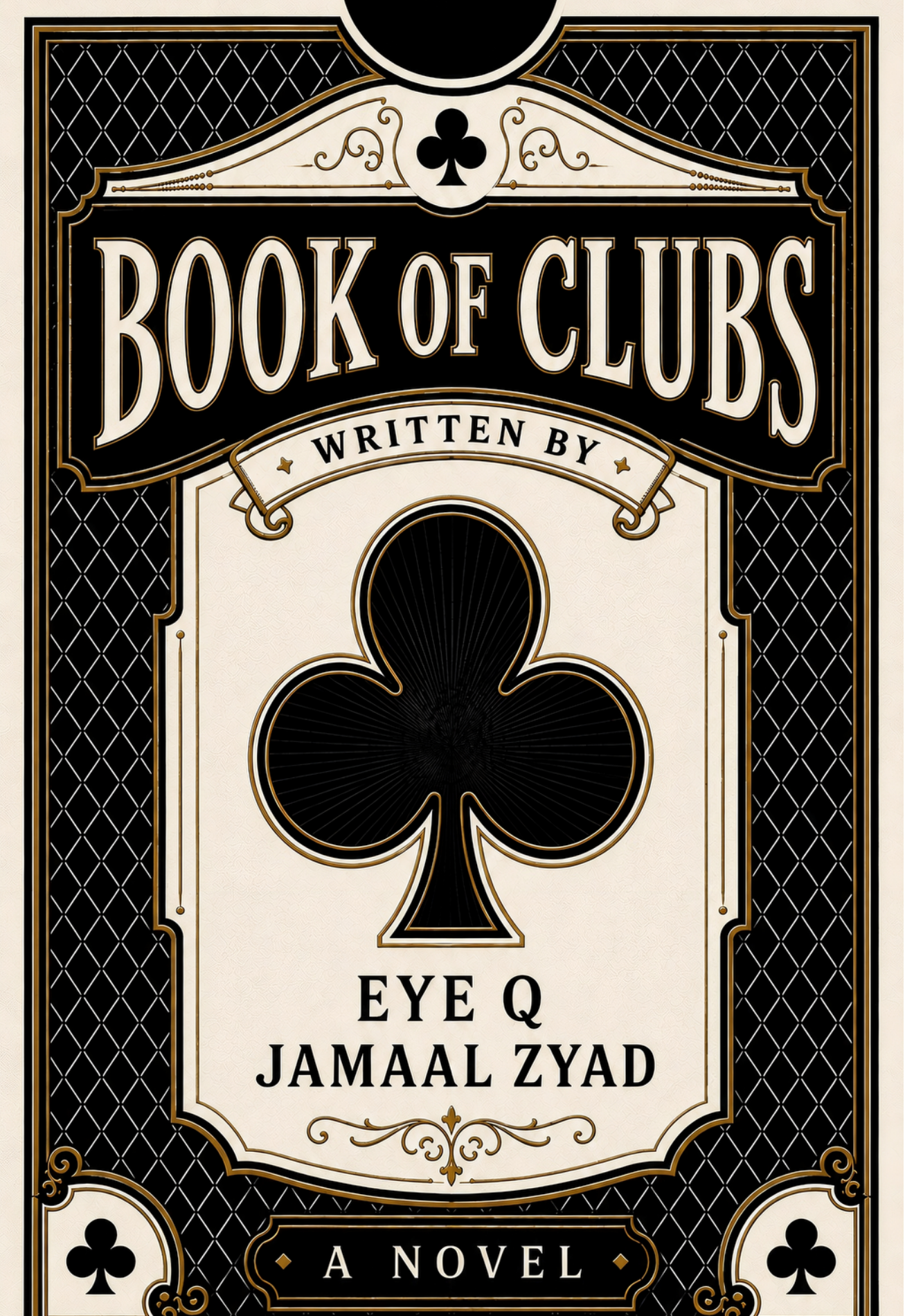
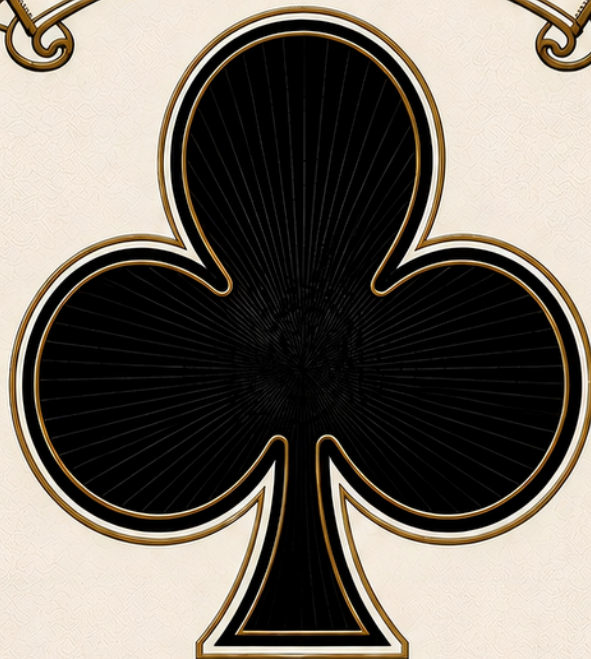




BOOK OF CLUBS

WRITTEN BY



EYE Q
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A NOVEL

Book of Clubs

A Novel

Written by Eye Q
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CLUBS Productions,
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2026 Chapters 1 – 4

Chapter One

Sarah Monroe leaves the engine running after pulling into the driveway, already drawn to the other side of the street.

A man stands beside what appears to be a large dog, both silhouetted against the afternoon sun as they face the neglected property.

Only then does Sarah notice where she's parked.

Tall brick homes line the street, separated by trimmed hedges and stone mailboxes. It feels like a place where families stay for generations. The neglected house beneath her windshield does not belong here.

At twenty-eight, she still has not mastered the look clients expect from a successful real estate agent. Black has always suited her better than business attire, so her compromise is a charcoal blazer over a black blouse. Short dark hair brushes her jaw, and a small crucifix tattoo slips into view when she reaches for the keys.

The engine falls silent. An afternoon glare streaks the rear windshield, but the figure across the street gradually takes shape, beginning with the dog. A Doberman stands by the shadowed man without tugging at the leash or drifting toward the nearest patch of grass. Every dog Sarah has known eventually finds something worth chasing or sniffing. This one seems to know exactly where it belongs.

The man comes into focus through the rear. Early thirties, lean and wiry, with shoulder-length brown hair touching a trimmed beard. His oversized black T-shirt, faded cargo pants, and worn crossbody satchel suit a hiking trail, not one of the wealthiest streets in town. He ignores the neighboring homes and passing traffic, his eyes never leaving the neglected house, waiting for something only he seems to expect.

Sarah follows his gaze that lands on the property ahead.

Paint curls from the house's siding. Weeds split the walkway leading to the porch, and a long crack runs through one front window. The **FOR SALE** sign leans toward the curb, worn by months of waiting.

The house holds her attention longer than she means to give it. Listings like this always make her work twice as hard just to get a buyer through the door. She has to sell the neighborhood first, then the potential, then whatever imagination the property still has left.

Her phone vibrates before she reaches for the portfolio on the seat.

Client: *Running a few minutes behind.*

Sarah slips the phone into her pocket.

Late is manageable. Late still means the showing might happen.

She takes the portfolio from the passenger seat, opens the door, and steps into the driveway. The neighborhood is unusually still at this hour. Then, somewhere behind her, a leash clicks.

Sarah turns as the man steps off the curb. He crosses without hurry, maintaining an even stride with the Doberman keeping pace beside him. She hears him murmur the dog's name.

"Atlas."

She watches for some sign that he means to pass her by, but the possibility disappears with every step.

He reaches the driveway and halts six feet away, pushing one hand into his pocket.

"Afternoon."

His voice carries the familiarity of a greeting neighbor.

She returns the nod.

"Afternoon."

His eyes are back on the house.

"You're showing it?"

"That's the plan."

He sees the weathered porch for a moment.

"Tough listing."

"You've noticed?"

"It catches people's attention," he says.

Sarah now noticing a dip in the roof.

"I'm hoping it catches someone's."

"I hope so too."

Their conversation fades. Sarah studies him while he continues watching the house, as though standing in a stranger's driveway requires no explanation. Most people hurry to fill quiet moments with conversation, but this man leaves the silence alone.

"You live around here?" Sarah asks.

"I spend a lot of time here."

She waits, expecting him to add something.

He doesn't.

A sprinkler clicks somewhere down the block and water sweeps across a lawn. The soft hiss whiffs through the neighborhood while Atlas stays focused on the neglected house, unmoved by the sound.

Sarah shifts the portfolio in her hand.

"I'm Sarah."

"I know."

The reply comes so naturally neither of them reacts at first.

A second passes. Then she looks at him.

"You know my name?"

Kaleb indicates the FOR SALE sign near the curb.

"It's on the listing."

Sarah turns to the sign and sees her name beneath the agency logo.

That explains it.

Still, something about the exchange stays with her. The answer comes too quickly, as if he'd heard the question before she'd spoken it.

Sarah tucks the portfolio under her arm when her phone vibrates a notification.

Client: I'm sorry. Something came up. I'll have to reschedule.

The message stays on the screen a moment longer. She locks the phone, watching another commission disappear with it.

Disappointment returns with familiar weight. Rent is due next week. The Civic needs brakes, and the mechanic has already warned her they won't last much longer. The next commission was supposed to cover both. Now it belongs to a showing that never happened.

Real estate wasn't supposed to feel like this. When Sarah earned her license, open houses, sold signs, and referrals from satisfied clients felt promising. Blazers became part of the uniform because successful agents wore blazers. The crucifix tattoo near her wrist stayed covered whenever she remembered. Each showing became an attempt to be the person clients expected, but that version of her never quite belonged.

Her younger brother, James, never seems discouraged. Every evening, he covers the kitchen table with market reports and handwritten notes, convinced they are one opportunity away from changing both their lives. Sarah admires that certainty.

Borrowing it forever has become harder.

"You lost them."

Kaleb's voice pulls her back.

"That obvious?" she says.

"I've seen that look."

Kaleb doesn't rush to reassure her. Oddly enough, Sarah appreciates that.

Across the street, a landscaping crew finishes loading equipment into a trailer. One worker, in a navy-blue jumpsuit, notices Kaleb, raises a hand, and climbs into the passenger seat. Kaleb holds up two fingers in greeting, maintaining the gesture until the truck rolls away.

People know him.

Or at least they think they do.

Atlas rises, stretches, and gives the leash a patient tug toward the sidewalk.

Kaleb glances at the dog before returning his face to Sarah.

"I might know someone who can help."

Laughter almost slips out.

"Unless they're looking to buy that house..."

"They're not."

His eyes stay on hers.

"I'm talking about you."

Wind stirs the trees and rocks the **FOR SALE** sign until it taps against its post. Sarah walks over and steadies it with one hand. The stake sinks another inch into the ground before leaning again.

The sight feels familiar.

"I might know someone who could help," he says.

She looks back at him. "With real estate?"

"With you. And James."

Her grip tightens around the portfolio.

James.

The name doesn't belong in this conversation.

For an instant, every possibility arrives at once. Had he been watching her? Following her? She measures the distance between them without meaning to. He stands close enough for conversation, not close enough to trap her. Oversized T-shirt. Cargo pants. Crossbody satchel. Nothing obvious besides a wallet, a phone... and whatever else fit inside the bag.

If he tries anything...

The thought finishes itself.

She'd put him on the ground before he knew what happened.

"You know my brother?"

Kaleb peers through her Civic window.

"Your speakers carry."

The drive comes to her in pieces: James on Bluetooth, his voice filling the Civic as she turned into the neighborhood, her own frustration spilling out before she told him she would call back after the showing.

Embarrassment lightens the suspicion. She had built an entire theory in a few seconds, only to discover the answer had been sitting inside her own car.

"So you heard enough."

"It wasn't my intention."

Atlas nudges the leash again, cueing Kaleb to look down before facing Sarah again.

"We've still got part of our walk."

He leaves the invitation between them.

"Would you mind joining us?"

Sarah turns back to the neglected house. The porch sags under its own weight, and the lockbox hangs from the front door exactly where she left it. Nothing waits for her there anymore except the drive home and an evening spent wondering where the next commission will come from.

"Alright."

Kaleb whirls the lease and steps on the sidewalk while Atlas falls into place beside him.

After clutching the door handle of her Civic to ensure its locked, Sarah follows them on their path.

They move further from the listing, passing rows of well-kept homes. Fresh mulch circles trimmed flower beds, sprinklers whisper across green lawns, and wind chimes drift from shaded porches in a neighborhood people spend years planning to move into.

Atlas stays a few feet ahead, slowing to sniff a mailbox before continuing down the sidewalk. Kaleb gives Atlas free range, never tugging the leash or calling him back.

An elderly man grabs mail out his mailbox, sorting envelopes in his wrinkled hand. His white hair is cut close, and reading glasses hang from a cord around his neck. Seeing Kaleb, his face brightens.

"Afternoon, Kaleb."

Kaleb lifts a hand in greeting as they continue walking.

Sarah glances between them. The exchange lasts a few seconds and tells the story of two people who might have crossed paths for years.

"So... what do you do besides walk dogs?"

"I've been walking the Governor's dogs for sixteen years."

Governor.

The answer sends her thoughts to the beginning of the afternoon. The house across from her listing. The one Kaleb had been standing near with Atlas at his side.

So that's who lived there.

She'd spent the last several minutes trying to decide whether he belonged in the neighborhood, or intruding, scoping out the homes and residents in them. Now the question matters less. Whether he lives here or not, he belongs on these streets.

A middle-aged woman in a powder-blue apron brushes dirt from her gardening gloves, looks up as they pass.

"How's Atlas today?"

"He hasn't embarrassed me yet," he says.

"Still time."

Kaleb gives a polite smile, and they continue on.

Every few houses, someone recognizes him. None of the exchanges lasts more than a sentence, but each one chips away at Sarah's first impression. Whatever Kaleb's connection to the neighborhood is, walking a dog barely explains it.

"Sixteen years is a long time," she says.

"It is."

They make it another half block when he finally speaks.

"They only gave me a three-dollar raise."

Sarah cuts closer to Atlas.

"Sounds like a terrible career move."

"Or the best one I ever made."

She waits for a grin that never comes, not entirely sure where his sense of humor ends and the truth begins.

Their conversation wanes with the sound of their footsteps. Atlas steps around a broken section of sidewalk without needing a tug on the leash. Sarah finds herself watching Kaleb more than questioning him now. He never seems eager to impress her. If anything, each answer seems to leave her with something else to wonder about.

Eventually, her curiosity circles to where the conversation began.

"You said you could help us."

"I can."

She waits.

Kaleb doesn't rush to talk.

"How?"

"I'm retired."

The words stop her.

She analyzes this time with a different question in mind.

"You can't be much older than me."

"Thirty-one."

Thirty-one.

Even James, at twenty-six, isn't much younger. Most people she knows are working longer hours, chasing promotions, or hoping the next raise will finally make life easier because retirement belongs to another stage of life.

"So how did you do it?" she asks.

Atlas breaks at the oncoming crosswalk junction.

"I didn't."

Sarah gives the answer a moment to breathe. It doesn't make any more sense than when he first said it.

"They did it for me."

The sidewalk begins to climb.

Sarah feels the grade in her legs, and the hill carries her thoughts to a neighborhood several hours upstate.

The streets had looked much like these, winding past large homes with long driveways and old oaks. Back then, she barely noticed the houses. They were landmarks along a route she knew by

heart, a route she ran until her lungs burned and the ache in her legs became easier to ignore than the thoughts in her head.

Some people ran to clear their minds. Sarah ran because she knew a fight was coming.

Girl groups turned bullying into an after-school sport, cornering younger students and anyone too afraid to hit back. Sarah watched it happen for weeks before deciding she had seen enough. She never knew exactly when her chance would come, only that it would. When it did, she intended to be ready.

The hill steepens underfoot, pulling her partway to the present. Atlas stays ahead while Kaleb walks without a word.

Her mind returns to the routine that became ritual. She ran the neighborhood, sprinted the hill, then shadowboxed the final stretch home until her shoulders burned. Every mile sharpened her resolve. Suspension from school never entered the equation. If those girls put their hands on another kid again, Sarah intended to stop it.

Years later, she could admit the girls themselves had frightened her less than what she was willing to do to them.

The ground levels out, and the memory slips away with it.

Kaleb reaches the overlook first and pauses near a weathered bench shaded by an old oak. Atlas circles once through the grass, lowers himself near the bench, and stretches his front paws into the shade.

A few steps later, she reaches the overlook. The neighborhood unfolds below in layers of rooftops and tree-lined streets before opening to the distant skyline. Somewhere beyond the curve of the road sits the neglected house where the afternoon began, already farther away than a short walk should allow.

She rests her portfolio against the wooden bench.

Kaleb has already removed a beat-up leather wallet from his back pocket.

“You play card games?”

A faint expression crosses his face.

“Not exactly.”

He fans the cards toward her.

“Let me tell you a story,” he says. “One about Clubs.”

Sarah moves closer and examines the fan.

Four kings stare back at her. King of Hearts ♥ King of Diamonds ♦ King of Spades ♠

And King of Clubs ♣

Four Aces and two Jokers complete the spread.

She glances up.

“What, are you a magician?”

“In a way.”

Kaleb gathers the cards, squares them against his palm, then slides another from deeper in the deck.

He offers it to her.

At first, Sarah assumes it’s simply another playing card. Time has softened the corners and dulled the surface. Before she can decide what feels different about it, the illustration draws her in.

There’s a diner sitting beneath the mountains untouched by time. It has a weather vane above the roof, an aging pickup truck parked beneath a flickering lamp, and a narrow strip of sky in the background. For one strange moment, she can almost hear gravel beneath her shoes, smell fresh coffee drifting through the front door, and remember walking across the parking lot.

The sensation unravels as she tries to make sense of it, and then the moon catches her eye. At first, she can’t explain what feels wrong about it. A heartbeat later, she understands.

The moon isn’t white.

It’s red.

On impulse, Sarah reaches for the card, and Kaleb lets her take it. Her thumb traces along the edge then she turns it over.

The familiar crosshatched pattern found is gone. The back is solid black, marked with two short lines in faded crimson lettering.

Hollow Rock Diner

Passcode: Red Moon

She reads them once, then again, letting each word sit in her mind. Finally, she turns the card over.

"Hollow Rock Diner..."

The name sounds ordinary enough.

The place doesn't.

She looks up.

"Is this real?"

Kaleb holds her gaze.

"It is."

Her eyes land back on the card. The diner, the mountains, and the impossible red moon have stopped being artwork.

"Why are you showing me this?"

Kaleb slides the remaining cards back into his wallet with the same care he used to remove them, then points to the image.

"Go there."

Chapter Two

Kaleb's gone, but Sarah doesn't leave right away.

She stands near the old oak, studying the card between her fingers while the neighborhood carries on around her. Cars move through distant intersections beyond the subdivision, and somewhere downhill, a garage door rumbles open before falling shut again.

Nothing about Brookstone suggests she has just been handed an invitation to something impossible.

Her eyes return to the image. A crimson moon hangs above a diner surrounded by pines, with a narrow road disappearing into the mountains. Under a single lamp rests a pickup, its windshield catching a faint strip of red light.

She flips it over.

Hollow Rock Diner
Passcode: Red Moon

No address. No phone number.

Sarah drops it inside her blazer pocket and starts down the hill.

The walk back feels shorter. Two children in bike helmets race through a cul-de-sac. Across the street, a middle-aged man in a faded Braves shirt washes his truck at the curb. Fresh-cut grass scents the sidewalk, mixing with the dampness left behind by sprinklers. Every house has the same polished appearance that caught her attention earlier.

Governor Riley's mansion comes into view, its long driveway empty. Thick tire marks darken the pavement near the curb, and the front gate remains half open.

She slows near the entrance, trying to make sense of what happened. Kaleb overheard her conversation with James through the Civic's speakers. From there, he could have guessed enough to make the rest seem more impressive than it was. People built entire stories from coincidence every day.

The explanation almost works.

Except for one thing.

Why them?

At the Civic, Sarah unlocks the driver's door. Heat trapped inside the car wraps around her until the air conditioner begins pushing it away. She leaves the invitation on the passenger seat and drives off.

Brookstone disappears behind her one turn at a time. Wide streets narrow into busy intersections lined with a moss-covered grocery store, oil-stained service stations, and aging strip malls. Farther down, a pawn shop shares a building with a tax office, and a laundromat glows near a dusty sign missing two letters.

She enters her apartment complex. Potholes and cracks cut through the parking lot, where most of the painted lines wore away years ago. Brick buildings face a courtyard of patchy grass and a rusted swing set that hasn't held a child in weeks.

She takes the invitation inside.

Coffee and paper mingle with warm air escaping the overworked window unit in the complex corridor. The apartment opens into one shared space: a worn sofa and bulky television near the front door, a dining area beyond them, and a square yellow kitchen tucked against the far wall. Between the rooms, there's a hallway that runs to the master bedroom, the guest room, and a half bathroom. Moving boxes still occupy a corner, unopened since the move months earlier.

James sits in the dining room with one leg bouncing underneath the table, too absorbed in the computer screen to notice her. Notebooks, market reports, and a silver laptop have nearly swallowed the dining surface. Sarah likes reminding him that she inherited every good gene in the family except his red hair, insisting he got the better deal in that department but still can wear it better than him.

A pen rests between his teeth while he fills a legal pad with numbers, arrows, and quick calculations, crossing half of them out again. Every few weeks, he becomes convinced he's found the opportunity that will finally put them ahead.

The idea changes.

His confidence never does.

Her keys strike the ceramic bowl by the door.

The pen disappears behind his ear when he looks up.

"Tell me you sold the haunted house."

"My client canceled."

He leans back with an exaggerated sigh.

"Well... there goes the yacht."

"You were buying a yacht?"

"I was buying two. One for weekdays, one for weekends."

Sarah grins and leans across from him.

"I'll let the marina know."

"I appreciate that."

He reaches for his coffee mug, finds it empty, and sets it back down.

"One of these days," he says, "we're going to trip over something so big we'll laugh about living here."

"You've said that before."

"I know." He smiles. "The beautiful thing about being wrong is I only have to be right once."

She shakes her head, bracing a hand against the chair.

"You'll get there."

"I know."

Sarah hooks a finger inside her blazer.

"I met someone."

His eyebrow lifts.

"Oh no."

"What?"

"Does that mean I gotta move out?"

A laugh slips out.

"No."

"Good. I was gonna start paying half the rent."

"You've been saying that for months."

"I'm getting closer."

She slides the black card toward him.

"I think it has something to do with this."

He picks it up and reads the red lettering against the dark backing.

"Hollow Rock Diner," he says. "Sounds like the kind of place that serves pie you regret ordering."

Sarah takes the chair across from him.

"A man named Kaleb gave it to me."

"The guy?"

"He was walking Governor Riley's Doberman."

Recognition comes quickly.

"The Governor's house over in Brookstone?"

"Across from my listing."

"So you spent the afternoon talking to Governor Riley's dog walker."

"I guess I did."

"And he handed you this."

"He said it could help us."

"Help us how?"

"He never explained." Sarah folds her hands around her coffee mug. "He told me to go there."

"Up in the mountains?"

She shrugs.

James looks over the message again.

Normal people don't hand strangers secret passcodes and send them miles away without saying why. Yet Kaleb had seemed completely at ease in Brookstone, surrounded by people who knew him.

"I like him already," he says.

Sarah presses her lips together.

"I figured you would."

"I mean..." He settles back in his chair. "If somebody retired in their thirties and thinks they've found a way forward, I'd at least hear them out."

Sarah ponders on the diner in the illustration.

"I don't know if this is a good idea."

He meets her eyes.

"But it could be what we've been waiting for."

James draws the laptop closer.

"If this diner is real, it's online."

"Maybe..."

He types **Hollow Rock Diner** into the search engine and presses Enter.

The page begins to load.

Sarah leans back in her chair, surprised by how badly she wants the search to fail. If nothing appears, she can dismiss Kaleb, the passcode, and the strange encounter near the oak as an elaborate joke.

Then she can forget any of it happened.

Instead, an index appears. And within it, Hollow Rock Diner lists on the web.

"Well... that's encouraging."

The browser loads and fetches a photograph covering the top of the page. The same diner sits at the bottom of the mountains beneath a bright blue sky, has a gravel parking lot full of pickup trucks and SUVs. The menu bar runs across the top of the screen.

Menu. Gallery. Hours. Contact.

Everything about it feels ordinary.

"The building's the same," says Sarah.

James compares the images.

"So are the mountains."

She brings the card closer to the monitor.

"Not everything."

Her finger settles near the top corner.

"The moon."

James scans the website again.

Every photograph had been taken during the day. Morning sunlight lights one image. Autumn colors surround the diner in another. Snow blankets the roof in a third. None of them show the building after sunset.

He opens the gallery anyway.

Families crowd the booths. Waitresses carry steaming mugs between tables. Hunters pose outside with fresh catches strapped to their trucks, making the place feel welcoming, almost ordinary.

Kaleb hadn't handed her an ordinary photograph.

James notices.

"Still thinking about him?"

She scratches her head.

"There's something off about this."

James closes the gallery and rests his forearms on the table.

"So..."

She already knows where this is heading.

"When are we going?" James asks.

Sarah folds her arms.

"I never said we were."

"You didn't have to."

He taps the card with one finger.

"You've looked at that thing more than you've looked at me since you walked through the door."

Sarah exhales.

"I don't like mysteries."

"No. You don't like leaving questions unanswered."

She can't argue with that. Now she have to decide whether Kaleb had given them a destination...
or a warning.

—

Sarah closes the laptop, but neither of them rushes to stand.

The apartment returns to its evening routine. The air conditioner rattles through another cycle while traffic drifts past outside. James gathers the loose papers scattered across the table, squaring the corners before stacking them into uneven piles.

Sarah watches him for a moment.

James has never been good at letting go of an idea.

She has heard that confidence in one form or another since they were kids. One summer, he became convinced they could make a fortune collecting golf balls from the pond behind the country club. Every afternoon he climbed the fence with a five-gallon bucket while Sarah kept watch for security. At the end of the summer, they had earned twenty-three dollars and a lifetime ban from the property.

James called it a learning experience.

Sarah called it trespassing.

Their parents never discovered where the money came from. James spent his share on baseball cards before the week ended. Sarah tucked hers inside an old shoebox until she could afford the running shoes she had been saving for. Looking back, she isn't sure either of them cared much about the money. James simply loved believing the next idea might be the one that worked.

Maybe that's why she never dismisses him completely.

Most of his plans fail.

A few come surprisingly close.

James stacks his papers to one side and points to the refrigerator.

"I'm making chili."

Sarah works her way out her seat.

"We've had chili three times this week."

"And somehow it keeps getting better."

"It keeps getting cheaper."

He smiles.

"That's the secret ingredient."

The evening unfolds the way most evenings do. James browns the ground beef while humming along with the sitcoms playing in the living room. Sarah changes clothes, answers two client emails, and returns a call from another buyer who promises to “circle back next week.” She has heard the phrase often enough to know what it usually means.

After washing dishes and placing them into a dry rack, Sarah switches off the living room lamp and heads to the hallway. She has almost reached her bedroom when she notices the glow—light spilling across the floor from the dining area where James writes notes.

He sits at the table with the laptop open again, but the stock charts are gone. A map of the mountains ceases the screen. Roads twist through dense forest before ending at a single marker labeled Hollow Rock Diner. On page, mileage estimates are written, gas prices calculated, and departure times allotted.

Sarah stops where the dining room opens into the kitchen.

“You never stopped looking.”

Parting his notebook.

“I tried.”

She walks over, pulls a chair.

The route climbs far into the mountains. Mile after mile of forest piles on screen, broken by the occasional road.

“It really is out there,” she says.

James clicks aerial zoom-in.

“Which makes me want to know why.”

Sarah gets up, rests one hand to the back of his chair.

She thinks about Kaleb, the neighborhood, the canceled showing, and the invitation waiting between them.

“What time do you want to leave?”

James’s surprise eases into a big grin.

“Eight a.m.?! ”

On the slick screen Sarah traces the route's range.

"Eight a.m. it is."

The trees stir in the gust beyond the apartment window. Somewhere past the city lights, Hollow Rock Diner waits them.

Chapter Three

Morning has a way of making strange decisions feel practical.

Sarah Monroe never trusts that.

Night gives fear room to speak plainly. Morning buries it beneath errands, bills, coffee, and the small routines people use to convince themselves they are still in control. By seven-forty, the black card on the kitchen table looks less impossible than it had in the apartment light the night before.

James stands near the door with his jacket over one shoulder and his laptop bag hanging from the other. He has packed for the trip as if opportunity might require paperwork. His notebook sticks out beside a phone charger, two pens, and a granola bar.

Sarah looks at the folder. "You're bringing research?"

James follows her eyes. "Preparedness."

"You packed stock charts for a diner."

James opens the door.

"Opportunity doesn't always provide Wi-Fi."

He gestures into the corridor. "After you."

"That's new."

"I'm being respectful."

She locks the apartment behind them and follows him down the stairwell. Somewhere below, a child complains about missing shoes. A television plays through a closed door. The building smells of old carpet and breakfast. Daily life continues around them, unaware that she and James are about to drive into the mountains because a dog walker with a Doberman told them to.

The Civic waits under the pale morning sun. Sarah gets behind the wheel, starts the engine, and pulls out of the apartment complex before James can build another theory. He manages anyway. By the time they reach the highway, he has already suggested that Hollow Rock might be a private investment club, an off-market business network, or a recruiting stop for people who “think differently.”

Sarah lets him talk through the city. She prefers him this way—hopeful, funny, half wrong and fully convinced that the next door might finally be the right one. James has always looked at dead ends and found hinges. It’s one of the things she loves most about him, and one of the things that worries her.

The city thins behind them. Shopping centers give way to storage units, then gas stations, then long stretches bordered by trees and low churches with white signs out front. James checks the route often during the first hour, mostly because sitting still has never suited him.

“Five hours,” he says.

“You said that when we left.”

“I’m confirming progress.”

“You’re confirming impatience.”

“That too.”

By late morning, the highway begins rising. Trees thicken along both sides until the view beyond the windshield becomes green, stone, and sky. Clouds gather around the ridges ahead, dulling the sunlight without bringing rain.

Sarah keeps both hands on the wheel. James grows quieter once the mountains take over. The signal drops from four bars to two, then one. The GPS keeps working, but the little arrow begins moving with a delay, as if the phone itself is unsure about the route.

“Still on course,” James says.

“For now.”

“Don’t say for now.”

“I said it normally.”

“You said it like we just passed the last gas station in a movie where nobody survives.”

Sarah shoves him. “You watch too much.”

“You don’t watch enough. That’s why you don’t recognize warning signs.”

She smirks. “I recognize them fine. You’re the warning sign.”

The highway curves around the mountain, one lane in each direction with worn yellow lines down the center. Guardrails appear in short stretches, then vanish exactly where Sarah wishes they wouldn’t. Beyond them, valleys sink beneath layers of trees and shadow.

She slows for a bend and glances into the rearview mirror. A charcoal sedan trails several car lengths behind a white SUV. Two cars traveling the same mountain highway should mean nothing.

The SUV stays between them for another mile. It drifts near the centerline, corrects, then holds its lane. The car farther back maintains the same measured distance through every curve.

Sarah eases off the gas. The Civic loses speed, and the white SUV closes the gap before crossing the yellow lines to pass. Its engine rises as it moves ahead, then slips back into Sarah’s lane with several car lengths to spare.

The other car stays put.

Sarah slows again, subtle enough that James might miss it if he weren’t already tense beside her. The vehicle matches her speed rather than passing.

Her pulse does not spike; it organizes.

James notices her grip on the wheel. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“That was a something face.”

“You keep a list of my faces?”

“I grew up with you. Survival required study.”

Sarah glances at the mirror again. The white SUV disappears around the next curve.

The charcoal car doesn’t.

“You see it?” Sarah asks.

“Yeah.”

“It was behind the SUV.”

“So?”

“The SUV passed us. That car didn’t.”

“Maybe he doesn’t want to pass on a mountain road.”

Sarah drops her speed another few miles per hour. The car does the same.

“Still think that’s why?”

James twists in his seat to peer through the rear window.

“Don’t stare,” shouts Sarah.

He faces forward again. “I wasn’t staring.”

“You turned your whole body.”

“I was observing.”

“You were obvious.”

James exhales and uses the mirror with more restraint. “It could be coincidence. There aren’t many places to go up here.”

Sarah divides her focus between the pavement ahead and the vehicle holding position several lengths back.

“I don’t trust coincidence.”

“You don’t trust microwaves if they beep different.”

“Ours changed for no reason. Had to get rid of it.”

James opens his mouth, thinks better of it, and faces forward. His humor remains, but it no longer reaches his expression.

The car follows through three more bends. Sarah says nothing. She collects details without making her concern obvious. Charcoal paint. Mid-size. Clean windshield. No front plate she can make out from this distance. Whoever is driving leaves enough space to appear harmless, which makes him less so.

The highway straightens for half a mile. A wooden sign appears ahead, half swallowed by weeds.

HOLLOW ROCK
5 MILES

Below it, a smaller sign hangs crooked from rusted nails.

DINER OPEN

James leans forward. “That’s either reassuring or deeply concerning.”

Sarah glares at the mirror.

“Still coincidence?”

James checks once, then faces front. “Could be.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

He pauses. “I don’t know.”

That is closer to the truth.

The last five miles feel cut off from the rest of the drive. Trees press toward the pavement. Wind rolls through the branches in uneven waves, flashing the pale undersides of leaves before the green closes again. The car stays with them until the highway dips to a clearing.

Then Hollow Rock Diner appears.

The building sits at the foot of the mountain exactly where the online photos placed it, low and rectangular beneath a weathered roof. Gravel covers the parking lot. Above the entrance, a metal sign holds chipped red letters spelling **HOLLOW ROCK DINER** against the clouded sky.

It’s 1:00 p.m.

The red moon from the card belongs to another version of this place. In daylight, nothing strange glows behind the glass, and the open lot offers nowhere for mystery to hide. The diner seems normal enough to feel staged.

Sarah turns in. Gravel snaps beneath the tires as she takes a space near the far end, facing the building.

The charcoal sedan continues down the highway without slowing.

James tracks it through the windshield. “Well, that makes it less suspicious.”

Sarah watches until it vanishes around the bend. “Or more.”

“If he was following us, why keep going?”

“If he wanted us to know, he would have stopped.”

James leans back. "That is not comforting."

"It wasn't meant to be."

They sit with the engine idling while Sarah studies the lot.

Three sedans.

A pale blue one near the front has a dented rear bumper and duct tape holding one taillight in place. Closer to the trees sits an older green car with dulled paint across the hood and a parking decal clinging to the windshield. The third, black and noticeably cleaner, rests near the wall with windows too tinted to see through.

Three cars, but the building feels larger than three cars should require.

James follows her count. "Three cars."

"You noticed."

"I notice things."

"You noticed because I did."

"Still counts."

Sarah turns off the engine, but neither of them moves. She reaches under the driver's seat and removes a matte black Glock 19 from the mounted holster. James spots it immediately.

"Why do you always have to bring that?"

Sarah checks the pistol, then tucks it in her jacket lining.

"Because I don't like needing things I left at home."

"We're going into a diner."

"We drove five hours because a retired dog walker gave me a secret passcode."

James studies the building again, this time without a joke.

"Fine," he says. "I'm glad you brought it."

"No, you're not."

"I'm glad enough."

They get out.

The cooler mountain temperature hits Sarah first, followed by pine, damp stone, and fryer grease drifting from the diner vents. Somewhere beyond the clearing, water runs over rocks. She closes her door and scans the highway.

Nothing returns.

That does not settle anything.

James crosses the gravel with her. He says nothing about the gun now. That tells her more than another joke would. His stride stays casual, but his attention moves between the windows, the wall of the building, and the black sedan parked away from the front.

Sarah takes in the cars while they approach. Dust coats the pale blue sedan's windows, though its tires are surprisingly clean. The green car near the trees could almost pass for abandoned. The black one sits tight against the structure, where its passenger door disappears into shade.

Someone could wait there unseen from the highway.

She keeps walking.

At the door, she pauses.

Through the glass, red vinyl booths line chrome-edged tables beneath framed photographs. A heavysset man in a denim jacket eats alone at the counter, one hand around a coffee mug. Near the back, an older couple sits across from each other without speaking, their plates half-finished.

A younger woman occupies the corner booth with a paperback open between her hands. Her narrow face stays lowered behind black bangs, but her gaze lifts when Sarah and James approach.

She flips a page without looking down.

Ordinary.

Too ordinary.

James reaches for the handle first.

The bell above the door rings sharply.

Heat from the diner meets them with coffee, bacon grease, old wood, and something metallic in the air Sarah cannot place. Conversation doesn't stop because there is barely any to begin with. The man at the counter keeps eating. The older couple remain bent over their plates.

The woman in the corner flips another page she has not read.

The waitress notices them from the register. She is middle-aged and petite, with the faded prettiness of a woman who might once have smiled from the side of a diner billboard. Her hair is pinned at the back of her head, and a name tag is clipped to her uniform.

It does not have a name.

It says **TWO**.

The label is printed in clean black letters.

Her expression gives nothing away.

“Two?”

Sarah nods.

The waitress grabs two menus and leads them to a booth near the wall. Sarah takes the seat facing the entrance before James can claim it. He notices but slides into the opposite seat without comment.

The waitress sets down the menus. “Coffee?”

James starts to answer, but Sarah speaks first.

“We were told to ask for the Red Moon.”

The waitress’s hand stills against the table.

Nothing else changes. The man at the counter lifts his fork. The older couple continue eating. The grill hisses beyond the service window.

The waitress stares down Sarah, then James. Her service mask slips enough to reveal something more guarded underneath.

“The Red Moon is an after-hours specialty,” she says. “Doesn’t start until the moon is up.”

James shoots a look at Sarah.

“Well, let me have a—”

“We’ll be back for the specialty,” Sarah says.

James closes his mouth.

The waitress holds Sarah's gaze another second. Whatever she finds there seems to answer a question Sarah never heard.

"Then come back after dark." Two insists.

She leaves the menus on the table and walks behind the counter, ending the conversation without another word.

James watches her go, waiting for the lady to pivot back and say "just playing".

However, nothing of that magnitude occurs.

Sarah faces the window again. The pale blue sedan is still near the front. The green one waits by the trees. The black car hugs the wall.

All seems normal for now.

Chapter Four

Two leaves the menus and returns to the register, ending the conversation without asking whether Sarah and James intend to order. The Red Moon does not begin until after dark. Whatever Kaleb sent them here to find will have to wait.

The laminated menus remain closed between them as Hollow Rock resumes its rhythm. The grill hisses behind the service window. Coffee fills thick ceramic mugs. The heavyset man at the counter cuts into his eggs without lifting his head, while the older couple near the rear eat in silence. In the corner booth, the young woman turns another page of her paperback, though Sarah has yet to see her spend long enough on one to read it.

James waits until Two reaches the register before leaning closer.

"So the famous specialty has office hours."

The comment earns no response. The waitress folds a towel and begins wiping the counter. Part of the name tag above her chest is hidden by a crease in her uniform.

Nothing about Hollow Rock behaves the way it should.

Sarah's phone pulses against the tabletop.

The agency's number fills the screen. She recognizes her broker's direct line and answers before it can stop ringing.

“Sarah Monroe.”

“Sarah, it’s Mark.” Her broker rarely bothers with small talk. “The buyers from this morning called me back.”

She straightens. “They changed their minds?”

“Looks that way. They want to see the house tomorrow morning, but they’re asking about the foundation estimate again.”

Some of the pressure crowding her thoughts eases. A second chance does not guarantee a commission, but it gives her something solid to work toward.

“I’ll contact the seller tonight.” She pulls a pen from her purse, smooths a paper napkin flat, and begins writing. “If everything checks out, I’ll meet them there tomorrow.”

Across from her, James slips out of the booth.

She covers the phone. “Restroom?”

He gestures to the rear.

“You’re seriously going to use it here?”

“I’ve survived gas station bathrooms.”

Her attention returns to the call. “Sorry. Go ahead.”

On his way down the aisle, James passes the register. Two keeps her face lowered, but the towel pauses against the countertop before moving again.

The corridor is narrower than it appeared from the booth. A single light hums above two restroom entrances and a steel side-exit door at the far end.

Before James reaches the men’s room, the door swings open.

A man in his late fifties steps into the corridor, dressed in a dark jacket over pressed trousers. Auburn hair streaked with gray is brushed away from a long face marked by shallow lines around the mouth.

James slows to let him pass.

The man offers no acknowledgment and never glances at the plaque mounted across the door.

OUT OF ORDER.

James watches him disappear into the dining room.

The black sign looks permanent, fixed directly to the wood rather than taped there after some temporary plumbing problem.

He tests the handle.

Locked.

James pulls once more. The handle refuses to move, but something shifts on the other side.

He leans closer.

The sound is too precise for pipes—more like a mechanism moving somewhere beyond the wall.

Then it stops.

The women's room bears the same plaque.

OUT OF ORDER.

He tries the men's entrance again. The lock holds.

Only a minute ago, a man walked straight through it.

James returns to the dining room, where Sarah is still on the call, writing across the napkin while Mark lists repair figures. He waits in the aisle until she notices him, points at the bathrooms, shakes his head, then motions toward the side of the building and the woods beyond it.

Outside? she mouths.

Three fingers rise.

Three minutes.

Mark asks whether she can email the updated disclosures before the end of the day. Sarah covers the phone and waves James on.

Go.

He mouths, *Thanks*, then slips through the corridor again.

“Yes,” she says. “I’ll send everything tonight.”

James pushes through the side exit door into cooler air.

Most of the parking lot disappears behind the building, leaving a strip of gravel between Hollow Rock and the woods. Damp earth replaces coffee and grease. Privacy should require only a few steps.

He heads for the trees.

Near the corner, bristles scrape concrete.

James stops.

Beside a stack of empty milk crates, an old man sweeps leaves the wind keeps pushing back into place. He is tall but narrow through the shoulders, dressed in a faded work shirt with brown suspenders. Mud marks the knees of his trousers, and worn farmer boots sit heavy beneath him. A soft cap rests low across his forehead.

At James's approach, he lifts his head with the energy of someone who has been waiting for conversation.

"Restroom get you?"

"Apparently," James says.

The old man chuckles, props the broom against the wall, and offers his hand.

"Three. I've been running this place a long time."

James shakes it, still deciding whether Three is a name or one more Hollow Rock oddity.

"Then you probably know why the restroom's been out."

"Awhile now."

"A man just walked out of it," James says.

Both of Three's hands settle on the handle.

"Did he?"

"The sign says out of order."

"That's what it says."

"Is it broken?"

Three smiles. "Not exactly."

James waits for more, but the answer ends there.

He tips his head toward the woods. "I was just going to find a tree."

"Plenty of those." Three angles the broom in that direction. "Careful where you step."

Beyond the first row of trees, Hollow Rock drops from view. James keeps walking until the side exit is hidden, then stops near a thick trunk with roots pushing through the soil. For a moment, the surroundings seem unremarkable enough—the slope, the brush, the muffled sounds from the diner somewhere behind him.

Then the feeling comes without warning.

Someone is watching him.

James keeps his head forward, resisting the urge to turn. At the edge of his vision, a break in the brush gives him a narrow view of the building. Three is still near the wall with his back turned, drawing the broom slowly across the same stretch of concrete.

James finishes quickly and studies the wooded slope. Brush crowds the spaces between the trunks, leaving pockets of shadow where the ground rises. Nothing moves there. Even the silence offers no clue to what first caught his attention.

He remains planted a little longer, listening.

Three continues sweeping.

Eventually, James works his way back toward Hollow Rock. The gravel comes into view first, then the side of the building. Somewhere between the trees and the diner, the scrape of the broom stops.

Three is waiting near the wall when James reaches him.

"Looks like you've seen something worth talking about," he says.

James studies him. "What makes you say that?"

Three turns toward the woods, as though the answer might be somewhere beyond the tree line.

"Hollow Rock's older than people think."

"The diner?"

"The diner's practically new."

That catches James.

“You like history?” Three asks.

“Depends what kind.”

“The kind nobody put on a sign.”

Through the side-door window, Sarah remains at the booth with the phone to her ear, writing across the napkin. She has not noticed how long he has been gone.

Three leaves the wall and takes a narrow trail through the weeds.

“Come on. Three minutes.”

James stays put.

The Red Moon has not begun, and every answer they have found so far has opened another question. Following an old man farther into the woods should be an easy thing to refuse.

Three offers no further explanation. He simply keeps going.

James checks the window once more, then follows.

Inside, Sarah ends the call and sets her phone beside the portfolio. With Mark’s voice gone, Hollow Rock settles around her again—the scrape of silverware, the hiss of the coffee machine, a page turning near the window.

Across from her, James’s seat is empty.

She folds the marked napkin into her portfolio and glances toward the rear. His promised three minutes have already passed. Sarah gives him one more before leaving the booth and approaching the register.

Two looks up.

“My brother stepped outside.”

“He’ll come back.”

The certainty in her answer offers little comfort.

“Did you see where he went?”

Two points toward the rear, then resumes arranging cups beside the coffee machine. The exchange ends so neatly that Sarah cannot tell whether the waitress is dismissing her concern or assuring her there is none.

Without James ahead of her, the hallway feels narrower. One light hums above the restroom doors, each marked by the same black plaque.

OUT OF ORDER.

Sarah tries the men's handle.

Locked.

Metal shifts faintly somewhere beyond the wall.

She holds the handle a moment longer. Whatever hides behind that door has little to do with broken plumbing.

The side exit door waits at the end of the restroom corridor.

Cool mountain air meets her outside. Damp earth and the scent of the woods replace the diner's heat. Beyond the gravel, pressed weeds form a narrow trail that disappears beneath the branches.

"James?"

Branches stir overhead, but no answer comes.

Sarah draws the Glock and keeps the muzzle low as she crosses the gravel. Within a few strides, Hollow Rock slips behind the slope, and the trail narrows between exposed roots and mountain laurel. The farther she goes, the more the diner fades until only the brush and her own steps remain.

James has always wandered toward whatever everyone else ignored—storm drains, empty houses, construction sites, anywhere curiosity outweighed common sense. Usually, Sarah could dismiss it as one more habit he never outgrew. Here, surrounded by unfamiliar woods and a diner full of people who seem to speak around the truth, it feels less harmless.

A boy's voice reaches her from somewhere ahead.

"You're close."

Sarah stops, searching between the trees for a face or a flash of clothing.

"Who's there?"

Higher on the slope, a girl answers.

"Past the big tree."

Sarah lowers the Glock a little farther. The voices sound young, but the children remain hidden.

“Come out where I can see you.”

“Daddy said not to talk to strangers,” the boy says.

“He gets mad,” the girl adds.

Movement flickers behind a cluster of shrubs. Sarah catches only a small shape slipping through the shade before the brush closes around it.

“My name is Sarah.”

For a moment, neither child responds.

Then the boy speaks again.

“Don’t stop.”

She follows the trail as the ground rises. The path bends around thick roots and low branches, carrying her deeper while the voices drift farther ahead. They remain close enough to guide her, yet never long enough in one place for Sarah to determine exactly where they are.

“They’re waiting,” one of them says.

“Who’s waiting?”

The woods give her nothing back.

Sarah goes several more steps before calling for James.

“James!”

His answer comes from beyond the next rise.

“Over here!”

Relief loosens something in her chest. She pushes through the last stretch of brush until the trees open into a small clearing.

James stands there with Three, lifting a hand as though he has only stepped away for a conversation.

“Told you I wasn’t gone long.”

Sarah is ready to answer when something beyond him steals the words.

A broad stone pillar rises nearly eight feet from the forest floor, square and monolithic, its surface the color of hardened clay. Roots coil around the moss-covered base, while years of exposure have worn the edges without erasing the symbols packed across every face.

The surrounding trees leave the monument just enough room to stand apart from the woods. Narrow breaks in the canopy let afternoon light reach the clearing, catching unevenly across the surface.

“What’d I tell you?” James says. “Historic landmark.”

His voice barely registers.

Sarah moves closer.

Letters cover the stone—some upright, others inverted or reversed, layered across older markings until the surface becomes a continuous field of language. She circles slowly, searching for order. Every promising arrangement breaks apart before it becomes anything recognizable.

Then one cluster holds.

THREE

Sarah shifts her angle, but the word remains.

Another step along the stone sends the surrounding letters back into confusion. Farther ahead, a second cluster begins to separate.

“Sarah?” James comes closer. “Sis, what is it?”

Her attention stays on the carvings.

The next word resolves.

SIDES

James follows her line of sight, but his expression stays blank.

Sarah continues around the pillar. Most of the markings refuse to become anything more than scattered letters. Then the pattern carries her farther, drawing another word into focus.

TO

She keeps going.

The final phrase emerges more slowly, gathering itself from the confusion as she rounds the next face.

MANY PLACES

Sarah steps back.

For the first time, the pieces form a complete thought.

THREE SIDES TO MANY PLACES

She reads the inscription from beginning to end. Everything around it remains tangled, but the sentence stays intact.

Three has been watching from across the clearing. He comes closer with the broom resting across both hands.

“What’s it mean?”

“I wish I knew.”

James examines the stone from top to bottom.

“I can’t even tell where you’re looking.”

“The words.”

“What words?”

Sarah points. “There.”

His eyes settle where she indicates, then wander across the neighboring markings.

“I don’t see anything except letters.”

Three leans in, testing Sarah’s angle before shifting to James’s. After a moment, he steps away.

“Looks the same to me.”

“I can read it,” Sarah says. “I just don’t know what it means.”

Three rests a hand against one corner of the pillar.

“I’ve stood beside this stone most of my life. My daddy brought me here when I was a boy. His father brought him before that.”

“And nobody ever figured it out?” James asks.

Three studies the surface.

“Not anyone I’ve met.”

James crosses to the opposite side, taking in each face before returning.

“I still don’t see it.”

Sarah repeats the inscription.

“Three sides to many places.”

He circles the monument, thinking it through.

“Three sides. A triangle?”

Sarah considers the words.

“That could explain part of it.”

“But many places...”

James searches the clearing for some shape or landmark that might fit. Nothing around them offers an obvious connection.

Several steps away, Three observes in silence.

“My granddaddy called it a marker. Believed it mapped something nobody could explain.”

He lets the words sit between them. His eyes travel across the pillar, then settle on the trail leading back through the trees.

“That’s about all I know.”

Three shifts the broom onto one shoulder and turns away from the monument.

“Three,” Sarah calls after him.

He keeps moving.

“Three.”

This time he slows and looks over his shoulder.

“We’ll talk soon,” he says. “The diner’s calling me.”

He faces forward and continues down the trail. Sarah watches until the brown trunks close around him.

James looks at her. “Guess that’s our cue.”

Before following, Sarah pulls out her phone and snaps a picture of the brick. The image comes through clearly, but the inscription blends into the surrounding nest of carvings on the digital screen. She lowers the phone and joins James on the trail.

The slope steepens, and Three is already out of sight. Pressed weeds ahead are the only trace of the path back toward Hollow Rock.

As they descend, Sarah thinks of the waitress behind the register and the number printed across her name tag.

Two.

Now old man Three.

Sarah and James emerge into the parking lot with the afternoon sun still hanging above the mountain. James checks the time on his phone.

“Four o’clock.”

Three crosses the gravel ahead of them, and the diner door closes behind him before they reach the Civic.

Sarah unlocks the car.

“We’ve got a while.”

James climbs into the passenger seat and pulls his laptop from beneath it.

“I had a feeling we’d be waiting.”

“You always bring that with you?”

“You never know.”

He opens a folder of downloaded movies while Sarah adjusts her seat, keeping Hollow Rock framed through the windshield.

“What are we watching?”

James reels through his collection. “You’re asking me with standards now?”

“I have standards.”

He scrolls through and pauses on *Sharknado*.

Sarah looks over. "Keep moving."

"You watched it twice."

"The house watched it."

James gives her a smirk, thumbs past *Sharknado*, and clicks on *Interstellar*.

The movie plays while evening gathers around the mountain. James slips into the story almost immediately. It has always been one of his favorite Christopher Nolan films, and before long he is following Cooper beyond Earth while Sarah tries to do the same.

She manages the story in brief stretches. Light from the laptop passes across James's face, his mouth tightening as the crew struggles to escape the water planet, every second costing them years.

Her thoughts drift back to the woods and the pillar covered in countless carvings. Most of the markings refused to become language, yet one word emerged with impossible clarity.

THREE.

Later, the old man gave her the same name.

She tells herself it could be coincidence, though the explanation weakens each time she returns to it. The waitress is Two. The owner is Three. The inscription begins with his name before unfolding into a sentence neither man could read.

Then she thinks of the children.

Their voices guided her through the woods, but she never saw their faces. They stayed behind the trees, claimed their father had warned them against strangers, and knew exactly where James had gone. She accepted them as frightened children because their voices gave her no reason to question it. Now, with the diner framed beyond the windshield and the marker still fresh in her thoughts, even that explanation feels incomplete.

Sarah follows the chain again, searching for the point where it breaks, but each detail leads her back to the same pattern. Beside her, James remains absorbed in the movie, occasionally glancing past the laptop toward Hollow Rock before returning to the screen.

Several scenes pass before she manages to focus on the film again.

The credits roll as the last of the sun slips behind the mountain. James closes the laptop and slides it beneath the seat while Sarah reaches for the door.

“Time?”

He checks his phone.

“Seven fifty-eight.”

They cross the parking lot, passing the same three sedans that have occupied their spaces all afternoon. Light from the diner stretches across the gravel as Sarah closes her hand around the entrance handle.

The bell above the door rings once.

Hollow Rock has changed.

The heavyset man still occupies his stool at the counter. The older couple have traded their empty plates for fresh coffee, and the young woman by the window remains absorbed in her paperback.

But the booths that sat empty earlier are now occupied.

Sarah scans the room, counting from one table to the next until the total becomes clear.

Eleven.

She counts again, hoping she made a mistake.

She did not.

Two stands behind the register, while old man Three is nowhere in sight.

James turns toward the front windows. The same three sedans still occupy the lot. They watched the diner for hours without seeing anyone arrive or leave, yet seven more people now fill the room.

Few acknowledge their entrance. The paperback dips briefly before rising again. A broad-shouldered man in a hunting jacket stands beside the jukebox without selecting a song. Across the room, a silver-haired woman with a loose braid sits alone, both hands folded on the table as she stares beyond the kitchen entrance.

Before Sarah and James reach the aisle, Two steps away from the register and intercepts them.

“The Red Moon is ready.”

She passes without offering a menu or waiting for an answer, then continues toward the rear of the diner.

Sarah watches her go. Every instinct urges her back toward the Civic and down the mountain before darkness closes over the road.

James comes alongside her, close enough to make the decision feel shared.

Together, they follow Two past the last occupied booth toward a narrow doorway marked **EMPLOYEES ONLY**.

With each step, the sounds of the diner grow fainter. Fluorescent lights hum above a different corridor stretching deeper into the building than Sarah expected. The faded wallpaper ends after several yards, replaced by bare concrete where exposed pipes trace the ceiling toward a second steel door at the rear of Hollow Rock beneath a single bulb.

When Sarah looks back, the dining room has already disappeared around the bend.

At the end of the hall, Two removes a ring of keys from her apron and unlocks the deadbolt. The heavy door swings inward, and cool air rolls through the opening.

Beyond the threshold, a passage slopes into solid rock beneath the mountain. Lanterns mounted along the walls cast warm pools of light across the uneven floor before the tunnel curves out of sight.

Sarah stops at the threshold. James comes alongside her.

Two steps away from the doorway.

“The Red Moon begins this way.”



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