

Cold Mornings

by Lenora Vale

He found her half-frozen on the mountain. She thawed more than the cabin.

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The man who opened the door had the expression of someone being asked to explain something for the fourth time.

"The road's closed," he said.

"I know," Petra said. "That's why I'm here."

He looked at her, then at the mud up to her knees, then at the small rolling suitcase she was dragging which had lost one wheel somewhere on the last half-mile of trail. He had black hair that needed cutting, a jaw that needed shaving, and the kind of eyes that were either very dark brown or very dark green — she couldn't tell in this light, and the porch bulb was doing nothing.

"You walked from the gate?"

"The car's in a ditch. I wasn't going to sleep in it." She smiled at him, because smiling had always worked as a first move and she saw no reason to abandon a strong opening. "I'm Petra. I've rented the cabin at the end of your road for the week. I assume you're the owner?"

"Caretaker." He looked behind her at the dark and the ongoing sleet. "The ditch — how bad?"

"Very."

A pause. A decision being made.

"Come in," he said, and stepped back.

His name was Rowan. He said it in the tone of someone reporting a minor inconvenience. He had a fire going in the main room and a book face-down on the chair arm and a mug of something that smelled like coffee and whisky. The cabin he was caretaking was his own — the rental was the smaller structure at the far end of the property, currently locked and with a heating unit that would take, he informed her, about three hours to warm up

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adequately.

"You can wait by the fire," he said. "Or sleep here. The couch is decent."

"That's very kind," she said.

He looked at her like she'd said something ironic and hadn't committed to it.

She stripped off her ruined coat and her muddy boots and spread her hands toward the fire and felt the sleet-cold start to leave her fingers. The room was low-lit and smelled of woodsmoke and something piney. Animal skulls on one shelf — not sinister, just someone who'd spent a lot of time outside. Watercolour of the mountain. A wall of paperbacks with cracked spines.

"You live here year-round?" she asked.

"Yes."

"By choice?"

He looked up from where he'd crouched to add a log to the fire. The firelight was doing something to his face that was making her notice it more carefully than she'd had time to outside.

"Yes," he said again. "By choice."

"You like quiet."

"I like quiet."

"I'll be quiet then," she said, and meant it, and picked up the nearest book from the stack by the hearthrug.

He sat back in his chair. She heard him pick up his own book. The sleet hit the windows and the fire talked to itself. After about ten minutes she heard the tension in the room shift — something she'd always been able to feel, the moment a wary person stopped watching you and simply allowed you to be present. She counted it as progress without saying so.

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She was asleep by nine, curled on his couch under a blanket he'd wordlessly deposited over her, and he woke her at seven with coffee.

She sat up, hair in absolute chaos, and said "Good morning" with such complete unguardedness that something in his chest did a thing he'd been carefully avoiding for a long time.

"There's a recovery service for the car," he said. "I called. Three hours."

"You called for me?"

"The road needs to stay clear." He sat down in his chair. "Drink the coffee."

She drank the coffee and looked out the window at a mountain that was white all the way to the treeline, and said "Oh." Quietly. Like the mountain was specifically for her.

"You've not been up here before," he said. It wasn't a question.

"I needed somewhere I'd never been," she said. "My — anyway. Somewhere new."

He waited. She didn't finish the sentence. He respected that more than if she had.

The cabin heated up by eleven. He walked her down himself with her one-wheeled suitcase and showed her how the heating unit worked and where the wood was stacked and which burner on the stove ran hot. She listened with the same total attention she'd given the mountain, which was unsettling.

"Thank you," she said, in the doorway. "For last night. And the coffee."

"It was nothing."

"It was nice," she said, simply. And smiled at him again — the same smile from the porch, but this time he was closer and the light was better and he understood it differently. It wasn't performance. It was just her.

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He walked back up the hill and stood by his fire for a few minutes looking at nothing.

She knocked the next morning.

She had made scones, which was not something he'd expected, and she handed him the tin without any preamble and said "I found your flour, I owe you flour," which was both true and not the reason she was there and they both knew it.

"Come in," he said, like the first night, except this time there was no sleet and no emergency and no excuse.

She came in. He made tea. She sat at his kitchen table and ate a scone and he ate one too and they talked — or she talked and he responded in his way, which was mostly listening and occasional short sentences that turned out to be surprisingly funny. She laughed at the third one and he looked at her with that startled look, like laughter was a bird that had flown into his kitchen unexpectedly.

"Do people not usually laugh at your jokes?" she asked.

"I don't usually make them."

"You've been making them since last night."

He looked at his tea. "You make it easy."

She looked at him across the table. The mountain was out the window, white and enormous. The fire was going. He was wearing the same dark sweater and he'd shaved, which she was choosing not to read too much into.

"Rowan," she said.

He looked up.

"I'm here for six days," she said. "And I'd like to spend at least some of them with you, if that's not terrible."

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"It's not terrible," he said. Very quietly.

"Good." She stood and took both their plates to his sink and started washing them, which was apparently the right thing to do because she heard him exhale behind her like he'd been holding something for a while.

It was day three before he kissed her. She had decided not to push it and had stuck to this decision with more difficulty than she'd anticipated, because Rowan on day three — Rowan who had taken her hiking on day two and pointed out a peregrine falcon on the far ridge with a quiet intensity that made her understand completely why he lived alone on a mountain — was considerably more than she'd bargained for.

They were on his couch, this time both on it, her legs over his because there wasn't really another configuration that worked for two people watching the same fire, and she said something about the way the light was changing on the snow and he turned to look at it and then, instead of looking at it, looked at her.

She turned to look at him.

"Petra," he said.

"Yes," she said, before he'd asked anything, because she knew where it was going and she had been a very patient person for three days and she was done.

He kissed her slowly. He was careful about it at first — hands cupping her jaw like she was something he wasn't sure he was allowed — and then she made a small impatient noise and put her hand in his hair and after that he was not careful at all.

He was thorough in the way he was thorough about everything else — the falcon on the ridge, the correct way to stack wood, the exact temperature of her tea — and she was grateful for it in a way she couldn't quite articulate and didn't try. He knew when to be slow and when she wanted him to stop being slow, and the second time she said his name it came out like a question and the third time it came out like an answer.

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Afterwards the fire had burned down to embers and she was lying against his chest listening to his heartbeat slow.

"You're going to be quieter tomorrow," she said.

"No," he said, which made her smile into his shoulder.

"Is this — " she started.

"Yes," he said, before she'd finished. Returning the favour.

She thought about the car in the ditch. The wheel she'd lost off the suitcase. The sleet and the porch light and his expression of profound reluctant hospitality.

"I planned to be alone up here," she said.

"So did I."

She laughed again. He made the sound she was already collecting — the exhale-laugh, quiet, only for her.

"Day four tomorrow," she said.

"And five," he said. "And six."

Outside, the mountain sat in the dark. Inside it was very warm.