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### Silence on the Mountain

The cool, crisp mountain air engulfed Isabelle Mark as she opened her car door and gingerly stepped down from the warm safe haven of her Jeep. The gravel crunched under her hiking boots as she made her way to the back of the car, popped the trunk, and began gathering her hiking materials. “Water bottle, flashlight, cell phone, rain coat, polar fleece, lunch...” She thought to herself as she mentally checked off all of the materials she needed for the hike. Isabelle swung her leg up onto the bumper and untied her shoelaces, pulling the strings tighter and tighter until she was satisfied, and then retied them. She undid her loose pony tail and expertly pulled her hair up into a tight bun that accentuated her sharp features. She had dark flowing hair, olive skin, and striking green eyes, which were the sole focus of her face. From years of dance training her body was thin, but strong. The hiking shorts and white t-shirt she wore seemed to hang off of her lithe frame with a grace and elegance that only dancers seem to possess. Her friends back in New York always joked Isabelle could make a grocery bag look like designer frock. Isabelle had just finished her junior year at Julliard, and after deciding she needed a break from the pandemonium of the city, she packed her things and flew to the family vacation home in Colorado. The house was her father’s most prized investment. He had bought the home 20 years prior and over time it had become the family’s favorite vacation spot.

The house was on the outskirts of Durango, an old mining town high up in the Rockies. The town was founded in 1878 and had processed gold. When the mining craze slowed, the town became a ghost town, with abandoned mine shafts and houses scattered throughout the mountains like forgotten treasures. The town pulled through and rebuilt itself on tourism, and since the 60s the town had become a center for skiing in the winter. In the summer, trails opened up all over the surrounding mountains and brave hikers came from all over the world to conquer the majestic cliffs. Isabelle did not particularly enjoy skiing, but in the summer there was nothing she loved more than exploring the trails that ran throughout the cliffs and valleys.

As Isabelle leaned up against the side of the Jeep the cool air rushed around her, the sun went behind one of the gathering clouds and a chill went up Isabelle's spine. Suddenly, she heard a car approaching, and as the car came into view and she recognized the driver as her childhood friend, Jim. Jim's family also vacationed in the town. The two had become friends when they were very young, and every summer had spent hours together hiking and exploring the town. "Hey stranger!" she called to him as he parked his truck and hopped down. Jim was studying Chemistry at Berkley and was as handsome as he was smart. When they were younger, Jim was always the child making friends with all of the other six year olds in the town park while Isabelle would stand by, shyly watching him orchestrate games of soccer, and tag. She had always envied his ability to charm people, and get exactly what he wanted. He walked toward her at a brisk pace, opening his arms in preparation to envelope Isabelle in a warm embrace. "It's great to see you, Iz," he said breaking into a smile, as he engulfed her in a huge hug. Isabelle stepped back and studied him. His sandy blonde hair was cut short, his skin was tanned, and it

seemed he was even taller than she remembered. "You're 20 minutes late you know," she said as she swung her backpack over her shoulder. "Come on, we should get moving so we don't get caught in an afternoon storm." The two companions set off down the trail at a brisk pace chattering about school, work, and the weather. As they climbed higher and higher up the trail the air became thinner, and the dense forest they had begun their hike in began to transform into clusters of trees that gradually became smaller, and less frequent. The clouds that had been far off in the distance at the beginning of the morning were now obstructing the sun, and the wind began to pick up. A dark shadow and silence fell over the mountain. After close to an hour of hiking the pair reached the ghost town at the top of the mountain. "God, it's gotten really windy... the storms usually never blow in this quickly," Isabelle commented. "Eh. That's mountain weather. It changes in the blink of an eye. It's fine. Now lets eat I'm starving," Jim replied as he surveyed the cluster of half demolished houses. "Jim, I don't know... I kind of think we should head down right now, I don't want to get caught up here in the middle of a storm. You heard about what happened to those three hikers last summer..." Isabelle trailed off. "Oh my god... Iz. You can't be serious. Those ladies were stupid and didn't know what they were doing... I mean the dumb cows tried to go exploring and didn't have enough sense to stay on the freakin' trail. We've done this trail a thousand times and I think we can handle a little rain," Jim replied sitting down on the rotting porch of an old cabin. He pulled out a sandwich, and began to eat as Isabelle stood and looked out on the valley below them, and then she turned to view the large jagged cliffs around them. The snowcapped peaks of the surrounding mountains were half concealed by dark ominous clouds. She looked back at Jim, sighed and sat down next to him, nervously picking at her cuticles. "You

wanna know something cool about this particular little town?” Jim asked as reached into his pack and pulled out a cookie and split it in half, offering one half to Isabelle. “Sure,” she sighed accepting the cookie half. “Okay so I was reading one of the coffee table books my parents have that like, talk about the area, and apparently all the people that lived up at this mine went absolutely nuts. The mine shaft was only in use for like two days, because by day seven of having the men and their families up here, a mining official came up to check on how people were settling in, and they were all gone. All 43 of them vanished into thin air. So after that they closed the mine, and no one else came up here until they reopened it as a trail.” Jim laughed as he looked at the worried expression on Isabelle’s face. “Seriously, Iz what are you freaking out about?” “I don’t know, I just have this bad feeling that we need to get back down the mountain is all, and telling me horror stories about disappearing towns does NOT make me want to stay up here a second longer.” Isabelle replied sharply as she shoved her empty sandwich bag back into her bag. “Alright, fine. Fine, we can head down now. Wait just one second I’m going to go pee first.” Jim said as he stood up and jogged into the cluster of trees on the outskirts of the town. A minute passed, then two, then three. Isabelle felt her muscles tighten with anxiety. Her heart began to beat quickly as she rose to her feet and began to run towards the woods. “Jim! Jim! Can you hear me! Are you okay?” she shouted, her voice echoing through the mountains range. She could feel the panic rising up from her stomach and each time she cried out his name sounded more choked than the last. She stumbled through the trees barely noticing as branches reached out and clawed at her smooth skin. Thunder began to rumble above her and the wind pick up to a dull roar. “Jim!” Isabelle gasped as the trees began to press closer to her, suffocating her, their thick dark branches

enveloping her. She couldn't see, she couldn't breathe. Thunder crashed overhead, and a bolt of lightning flew through the sky, and disappeared behind a mountain peak. The dark swollen clouds overhead burst, and rain began to pelt down upon her as she blindly stumbled deeper into the trees, towards the mountain. Suddenly, the trees stopped and Isabelle found herself stumbling upon the edge of a clearing. Through the rain Isabelle could make out the outline of a house, much like the other houses back in the ghost town. However, this dwelling was much larger, perhaps twice the size of the other cabins. The roof slanted on either side and had gaping holes where shingles once hung. The windows were still intact, but dirt and grime had clouded the glass so it was impossible to see inside. The large front porch sagged in the middle and boards appeared to be missing in places. Beyond the porch sat the front door. The door appeared to have once been painted a bright red, but as the years had passed, neglect and the harsh mountain weather had faded the door to a dark muddy red, much like the color of freshly dried blood. Isabelle felt the blood in her veins turn to ice. As Isabelle stood motionless, the rain pelting down upon her, she felt the house dark windows of the house staring through her, like piercing black eyes. "Maybe he just ducked into this house to wait out the storm," She told herself. Isabelle began to step forward, but deep in her sub-conscious she knew Jim was not in the house. She began to step forward, some invisible force pulling her forward towards the house. Her steps felt heavy and static nothing like her usual gait. She stepped closer still. Thunder roared through the mountains shaking the ground. She stepped up onto the first step, then the second, and the third. She came to the door and placed her hand gingerly on the surface, feeling the peeling splintered wood underneath her wet palm, and gave it a shove. The door swung opened with ease, as if it had been waiting,

excepting her to come and push it open. "Jim?" Isabelle murmured as she stepped across the threshold. No sooner had she stepped a foot into the house she realized she had made a terrible mistake. The door slammed shut behind her, locking instantly. Isabelle realized she had made a calamitous mistake. She tried to scream, but no noise would pass her lips, fear choked her, and held her in its tight grip. She looked about frantically desperately seeking a way out, her eyes darted around the room, but her frenzied searching was to no avail. The rooms of the dwelling were completely empty save walls and walls of picture frames. The rooms were dark, and full of shadows, the dirty floors were covered in debris, and the wallpaper was grey and peeling. Suddenly a dim light in the back of the house caught Isabelle's eye. "Hello?" Isabelle whispered her voice hoarse, and shaking. She found her self stepping forward being propelled by the same invisible force she had felt before, to her horror she began to move down the hall closer and closer to the light. As Isabelle moved down the hall she could feel the eyes of the people in the pictures peering into her, following her. At the end of the hall lay a kitchen, with nothing but a sink, rotting walls, drooping ceiling, and a table with two chairs, and candle sitting on the table. A pile of debris sat in one of the chairs, suddenly the debris began to move, and as Isabelle focused harder she began to realize, the pile of debris was not long forgotten trash but a person. An old woman sat in the chair, her back rounded and her clothes in shreds. Her skin was covered in soot and dirt, her hands were long and boney and her nails were ragged and un-cut. Her hair was mostly gone. She slowly turned to face Isabelle, her nose was large and pointed and her face sagged, her two small beady black eyes focused in on Isabelle's trembling body. Slowly she lifted her finger, and beckoned Isabelle to come closer, her black eyes never straying from Isabelle's face. The invisible

force pulled Isabelle towards the woman, until she stood only a foot away. Inside she was screaming at herself to run, to flee, to scream, yet her body would not respond. All she could do was stand silently, and watch in horror. "I am grateful you finally came to me. I was beginning to wonder if you would come at all." The old woman spoke, her voice was barely a whisper. "I do not like to be lonely you see, and when I find someone special, I have them come. You will make a fine addition my pet," the woman said. She reached her bony hand out and grasped Isabelle's palm; a whimper escaped Isabelle's lips. "Shhh my pet, I won't hurt you. I have been yearning for new company for some time now, a new face. All of the others hanging on the wall have begun to bore me. Oh hush now. Come, sit." Isabelle felt herself moving to the empty chair and sitting, she felt herself slipping away, further into the grip of the woman's power. The old woman pulled an empty picture frame from the filth covered wall and placed it in front of Isabelle. The woman's black eyes bore into Isabelle's own green eyes and she began to move her lips, inaudibly whispering something. With a slow realization Isabelle began to comprehend what her fate was, she was to hang from the wall and join the others. She would hang, silently watching others suffer the same fate and pleading to be let free for all and eternity. Isabelle felt her self slipping away, she began to lose feeling in her limbs, the room began to spin, and she could sense the woman's cold black eyes drilling into her. She slowly sank farther and farther into the darkness that surrounded her, the room spinning faster and faster until everything went blank.

When she awoke Isabelle tried to move but she could not, she could not breath, yet she desired no air, she could not hear, she tried to speak, but could not. She could only look out into the dark rotting house from her new hanging place in the hallway.

Suddenly, she saw the front door open, and there was Jim, his eyes wild with worry, he was shouting something. He turned as the door slammed behind him, squinted as he saw the light coming from the kitchen, and he began to walk down the hallway. “No Jim! Stop! Run!” Isabelle’s thoughts screamed as she desperately tried to find some way to save her friend, but she was powerless. Jim slowly walked down the hallway, and examined the photographs hanging from the walls. “Notice me, please Jim. Run!” Isabelle wanted to yell, yet she could not. As Jim passed by her, her green eyes followed him, until he disappeared out of sight, forever.