

First Draft

The sun a molten coin in the Kansas sky dipped below the horizon, painting the wheat fields in hues of fire and shadow. Ross Christian watched it go, leaning against the porch railing of his cabin. The air, thick with the smell of freshly cut hay, was still and peaceful.

He was thirty-six years old, and felt them all. The lines etching themselves around his perpetually somber brown eyes deepened with each assignment he took. His short, jet-black hair was perpetually rumpled, a stark contrast to the precise movements of his hands as he whittled on a hand-sized block of cedar.

He'd spent the afternoon splitting wood, the rhythmic thud of the axe a strangely meditative exercise. Now, the silence was broken only by the chirping of crickets and the distant lowing of cattle.

His cabin, a simple structure of weathered wood and a sturdy metal roof, was nestled deep within a patch of woods a few miles outside Lawrence and to anyone passing by, it would appear to be the home of a solitary man, content with the quiet life. And, in many ways, Ross was content. He had deliberately cultivated this existence.

His days followed a predictable pattern. He'd rise with the sun, a silent alarm clock honed by years of ingrained discipline. He'd start with a rigorous workout – pushups, situps, and sparing with a heavy bag hanging in the barn. The bag, worn and scarred, had absorbed countless hours of his frustration and pent-up energy. The casual observer might see it as a way to stay in shape. Ross knew it was much more. It was a daily reminder of the skills he couldn't let atrophy.

Breakfast was always the same: oatmeal with berries, a protein shake. Efficient. Fuel. He kept a garden behind the house, grew vegetables and herbs. Organic. Self-sufficient. He'd spend hours tending to it, weeding and watering, finding a strange solace in the act of nurturing life. He also checked his perimeter, a subtle sweep for anything out of the ordinary, a disturbed patch of earth, a broke twig, the faintest scent of something unfamiliar. Most days, there was nothing. But the habit, ingrained through years of extreme caution, remained.

He'd often spend afternoons reading, anything from classic literature to manuals on survival and self defence. Knowledge he knew saw as crucial as any weapon. His eyes, though seemingly relaxed as he scanned the pages, constantly darted to the surrounding woods, analyzing the play of light and shadow, cataloging every sound. A rusty hinge, barely noticeable to the untrained ear, was enough to bring him to full alert.

Final Draft

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