



Círculo Rojo



# **ASHWOOD FALLS**



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EDITORIAL

Primera edición: abril 2026

Depósito legal: SE 1292-2026

ISBN: 979-13-7046-617-6

Impresión y encuadernación: Editorial Círculo Rojo

© Del texto: Alvaro Peña Alcalde

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Impreso en España - Printed in Spain

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# Acknowledgments

First of all, I want to thank my family, who have always supported me in this adventure. To my daughter, whose imagination and sense of justice helped me decide who lived and who died within these pages.

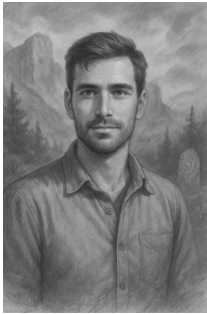
I also owe a special thanks to my colleague Ana, from the TGSS, who kindly acted as my editor and whose patience and sharp eye improved this work in countless ways.

And finally, to Nestor, my English teacher and companion in this journey, who guided me with his corrections and encouragement, turning my ideas into words.

This book would not exist without you.



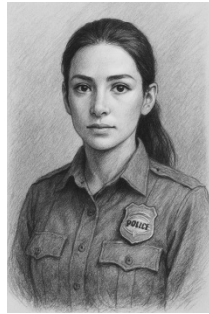
# Characters



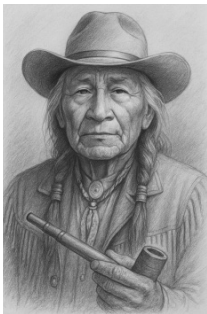
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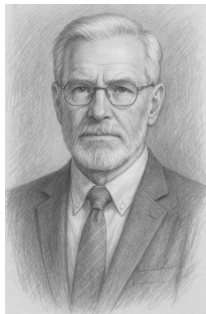
Claire Meyers



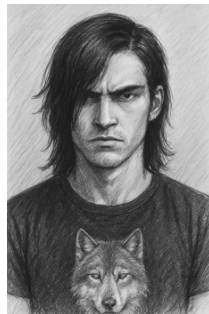
Amanda



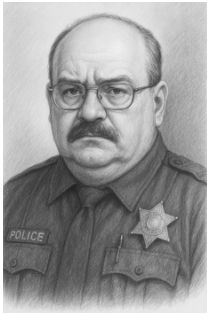
Tawa the Shaman



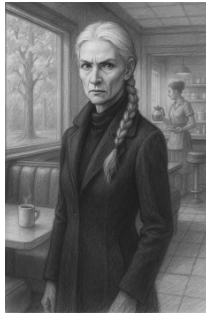
Mr. Wilkinson



Logan



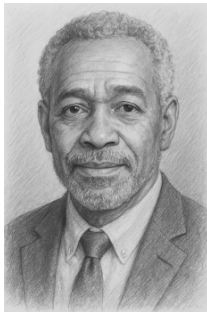
Chief Buckley



Maika



Harold Whitmore



Malcolm Crowe

# Chapter 1

The crisp mountain air filled his lungs as Elías Stone stepped out of the old stone house. The hamlet was quiet at this time of year, too late for summer tourists and too early for winter hikers. The weathered buildings near the main house stood empty; they weren't meant for people, but for cattle. The cows and horses were already outside, enjoying the early sun.

The village lay far down the hill. Between the manor and the town, more scattered houses belonging to Elías's relatives, dotted the landscape. They formed a sort of private neighborhood, each house with a wide, well-kept garden, fenced in with granite posts connected by barbed wire to keep livestock out.

Elías had loved coming here every summer since he was a small child. On this early morning, he adjusted the strap of his backpack and took a deep breath.

The horses were grazing near the house, behind the stone wall that separated the rough parking area from the paddock. The gate was closed but, as usual, not locked.

He walked toward Sombra, his favorite mare, who was lazily chewing grass. They had become something like old friends. Each day, Elías saved the peelings of watermelon, peaches, apples, and other fruits, which Sombra devoured eagerly. Afterward, he would spend hours brushing her back and neck.

So when Sombra saw Elías approach, she didn't move away like the others. She waited patiently until he stroked

her neck with his hand. Then, together, they walked toward the stables.

Elías moved silently, careful not to wake anyone. He wasn't supposed to do this, not alone, not through the mountains. But Elías often felt more at ease in silence than in the presence of people. Especially lately.

At sixteen, he was thoughtful and distant. He had never been a troublemaker, but neither was he someone who followed every rule. Sometimes, the voices of adults felt like echoes in a cave, distant and meaningless. And this morning, he needed to ride. To be alone. To think.

He saddled Sombra and walked her for a short while, waiting for her to relax her belly before tightening the strap. He was an expert rider and knew horses often inflate their lungs when being saddled, so the girth seems tight at first. Later, when they exhale, the saddle loosens and can cause the rider to fall. Sombra knew this trick but she still tried it every time.

The path that led into the mountains was barely used anymore. The farm was huge and had belonged to the family for generations. At the foot of the mountain, on the flat lands, cows and sheep were raised. But the property extended high into the rugged slopes as well. There were forests, rocky outcrops, and even a small river, the Creek, running through narrow canyons and secluded valleys.

Higher up, there was an old hunting cabin known as The Hunters' Hut. Three elderly brothers from the far north used to hunt there once or twice a year. They maintained the trails, but now, with age, they came less and less often, and the paths had fallen into disrepair. That part of the land was almost forgotten.

The ride was calm. Sombra was an excellent mare and enjoyed their countryside walks. She was easy to guide, and Elías relaxed as he admired the beauty around him, the early morning

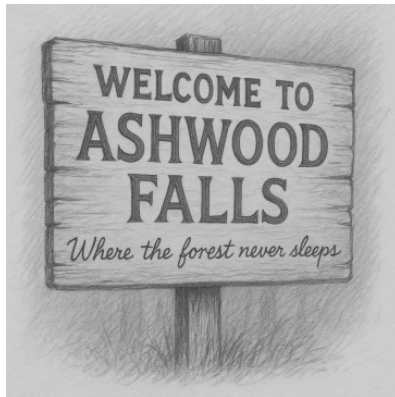
birdsong, the soft rustle of pine trees, and the faint, soothing murmur of the Creek River not far away.

Now and then, he had to duck his head to avoid low-hanging branches. As they turned a bend, a sudden hiss broke the stillness. A viper slithered across the narrow path, its movement so quick and sinuous it was barely more than a blur. Sombra reared up in panic, neighing loudly. Elías tried to hold the reins, to calm her but she bolted. The world turned into chaos, trees flashing by in green and brown streaks. He felt the saddle slip, his grip falter, his balance fail. Then came the fall. A sharp crack of pain tore through his side, and before he could cry out, everything dissolved into blackness.



## Chapter 2

The road twisted through dense pine forests and jagged outcrops, climbing higher into the heart of the Rockies. From the bus window, Elías watched as sunlight filtered through the towering trees, casting shifting shadows on the road below. It had been hours since they passed the last gas station. Civilization had slowly melted into wilderness, replaced by endless trees, distant peaks veiled in mist, and the occasional deer darting across the road.



A small wooden sign finally came into view. It read: “Welcome to Ashwood Falls. Underneath, someone had scrawled in faded red paint: “Where the forest never sleeps”.

The bus hissed to a halt beside a weathered bench, the only sign of a station. Elías stepped off and inhaled the cool mountain air. It was thinner here, sharper, with the scent of pine and something else, damp stone and moss, maybe. It reminded him of home, but wilder. Untamed. The landscape was a stark contrast to his native Avila, colder, wetter, and wrapped in a crisp mountain silence. Though it was still summer, he already missed the warm, dry air that would be brushing against his skin back home, where he'd normally still be savoring the last days of vacation.

Waiting by a forest-green pickup truck was a woman in her late thirties with straight medium-length blonde hair and a denim jacket over a turtleneck sweatshirt. She waved with a smile that was friendly but reserved.

"You must be Mr. Stone." She said. "I'm Claire Meyers. Biologist, like you. I teach senior year. I'm also your faculty liaison while you're here. I hope your trip was comfortable enough. I know the road is long and sinuous but it keeps us isolated from the crowds, which allows us to maintain the essence and beauty of this place."

"Elías. Call me Elías." He replied with a warm smile, shaking her hand. "Thank you for meeting me. The trip has been nice. In fact, as you can expect, I love nature and enjoy wandering through the woods."

Claire looked at him strangely for a second and then smiled. "Of course. Welcome to Ashwood Falls" She gestured toward the truck.

"I'll take you to the rental office to get your keys, then to your new home."

As they drove, Claire explained a bit about the school. Ashwood High had just over three hundred students, most from families that had lived in the region for generations. There were small villages near Ashwood and the kids from these places went to Ashwood primary and high school. Life in town moved

slowly, with the seasons. Elk sightings were common. Snowstorms, even in spring, were not unusual. People here trusted each other but took time to trust outsiders. That, she added gently, included teachers.

The rental office was a log cabin tucked beside the town's only grocery store. Inside, a woman named Linda handed Elías a thick envelope containing keys, utility instructions, and a hand-drawn map.

Claire parked the truck outside a narrow gravel path flanked by old birch trees. "This is your new house." She said.

The road was quiet, save for the crunch of tires on stone. As the trees thinned, the house came into view.

It was a large Victorian, deep green with white trim. Two stories, with gables and a wraparound porch. The stone fence surrounding it was waist-high, ancient-looking, weathered by time and snow. A rusted iron gate creaked open as Claire pulled in.

"The last teacher who lived here retired two years ago. Nobody's taken it since. Bit far from town for some, but it's peaceful. And the forest's right at your doorstep."

Elías stepped out of the truck and walked up the narrow path, his boots crunching the gravel. Wind rustled the trees around the garden. Somewhere deeper in the woods, a raven croaked.

He paused at the porch steps, feeling the quiet settle around him.

The house was clean and tidy, clearly prepared for his arrival. Someone, most likely the rental office, had made sure it was aired out and dusted. Still, the place felt like it belonged to another era. Every room was filled with old furniture: worn, heavy pieces with the scent of time soaked deep into the wood.

The front door opened into a spacious entrance hall with a high ceiling that echoed faintly with every step. A wide staircase rose straight ahead, its banister carved and darkened with age. To the left, a corridor led to the kitchen, where a side door provided access to the basement, a place Elias thought to explore later.

Also on the left, a door opened into the dining room, which connected directly to the kitchen. To the right of the main hall, the living room welcomed with large windows and faded arm-chairs. Behind it, through another door, lay a cozy library lined with shelves and a desk facing a wide window that offered a view of the backyard and the dense forest beyond. It was easy to imagine long hours spent there, reading while the wind stirred the treetops.

The kitchen had its own back door that opened onto the garden, a space that looked wild but beautiful, fenced by stone and embraced by nature.

Upstairs were three bedrooms, two modest bathrooms, a store room and a small office tucked beside one of the windows. Finally, a narrow staircase near the end of the hallway led up to the attic: a large open room with a creaking wooden floor and a sloping gable ceiling. Dust still lingered in the corners, and light filtered through a small circular window like a silent watchful eye.

The house was old, and so was the furniture just as aged, but comfortable enough. The rooms were large, filled with objects and shadows, and steeped in mystery. The paintings displayed long-forgotten faces, their names lost to time, while the thick carpets, though once luxurious, were now worn and threadbare in places. Elias noticed small holes near the baseboards signs that he wouldn't be entirely alone in the house after all. The lightbulbs were outdated, nestled within wall sconces of thick, frosted crystal that softened the glow into a dim, yellowish haze. The wallpaper was dark, patterned with an intricate and almost hypnotic design that seemed to move subtly in the half-light.

Maybe the house was going to be too big for just one inhabitant, but that was how things were. He couldn't complain. He preferred this over sharing a flat with roommates. And he was sure he would spend most of his time in town anyway.