

Small Town Heroes
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The driver picked his way through the storm as the passenger ate, bites timed around the bumps from the mountain roads.

“Do you see anything?”

The passenger looked past his sandwich at the map. “No.” his voice was muffled by the food. “I’m not even sure we’re on the road anymore.”

“Why does he always say we have to do this shit in storms? Or at night? Or...”

“Dramatic effect.”

The driver frowned at this before slamming the brakes in front of a stop sign. After the sudden stop, he slowly edged the dark SUV as close to the sign as he could and picked out the street name.

“This is it.”

The passenger shoved the last of the food in his mouth and looked at the empty land around them. A small gas station sat at the crossing. Its sign advertised ammo, video rentals, and a pizza parlor. The owner’s house sat butted up against it. “This is his town?”

“They said it was rural.”

“I think, yeah. This is the only building here. The town has one shop? Fucking one? You remember getting kicked out of the mall as a kid?”

“No, I didn’t really go to the mall.”

“Nerd. Anyway, can’t do that here. You wouldn’t be able to buy food anymore.”

A short laugh. “The house should be this way,” the driver said.

They drove another few miles through empty farm country and turned down a driveway. The gravel drive went past acres of fields before ending at a quaint farmhouse.

The men pulled out identical files and did a final run through.

“Name?” asked the driver.

“Eleanor McGaskin, husband was James McGaskin. Birthdate?”

“May 16, 1946. Service?”

“CIA. Location of specialty?”

“Southeast Asia. Screw this. Come on, we’re ready.”

The driver reached into the back and pulled matching black jackets. They pulled on the jackets over matching white shirts with matching ties. “Earpieces are in the glove box,” he said to the passenger.

They hooked the tiny speakers over their ears and trailed loose cords connecting to nothing down their backs. They pulled matching sunglasses from their jackets and put them on before getting out of the car. They fought the urge to run through the cold rain and walked solemnly instead.

Knock, knock, knock.

An old lady came to the door. “Can... Can I help you?” she said.

“Are you Mrs. Eleanor McGaskin?”

She nodded.

“Ma’am, I’m Agent John and this is Agent Smith, we’d like to talk to you about your husband.”

“Jimmy? Well... come on in.”

She sat them on a small couch and asked if they’d like anything. They declined. Not even a towel to dry their suits? Hot tea? They repeated their answer and opened one of the folders as Eleanor sat down.

“I’m sorry to say this,” she said. “We lost Jimmy last summer.”

“Ma’am, we know and we’d like to offer our condolences. But, we’re here to tell you something the may come as a bit of a shock. Your husband was a spy for the U.S. Government.”

That line marked the start of a script for the two men.

“My Jimmy? No, no, he was a farmer.”

“Yes ma’am, but he also did work for the Central Intelligence Agency.”

“The only time he even left home was to go to the veteran hospital. His knee was bad, you see.”

“And when he went to Vietnam,” the passenger said. “James McGaskin’s draft number was pulled, but he had already volunteered. He was processed with other draftees but during basic training he was pulled from his company to begin training as a covert agent.”

“Jimmy? No, Jimmy was in the war but he stayed in the south he-“

“He volunteered to go north, well past enemy lines,” the driver said. “His contributions to reconnaissance and intelligence gathering saved hundreds, if not thousands of lives.” He pulled a plastic box from his pocket, and opened it to reveal a medal suspended from a ribbon. Below it, a small piece of the same ribbon was affixed to a pin.

“Ma’am, on behalf of a grateful nation, I would like to present you with your husband’s Intelligence Star. Earned for gallantry during the Tet Offensive as well as advisory services throughout his life.”

Eleanor looked confused.

“He wasn’t really going to the veteran’s hospital, ma’am,” the passenger said.

She took the box reverently, tears in her eyes, and said, “Thank you.”

The men took their leave of the crying widow, climbed in the truck and began driving. “What did he really do?” the driver said.

“Uh, he was a fueler or something. Lucky draftee job in the south.”

“Think she’ll suspect anything?”

“Hell no, next church service will be about duty. Next baseball game? There won’t be a dry eye during the national anthem. If quiet, honest James McGaskin loved his country this much, it must be worth something.”

The passenger paused before continuing. “Besides, if she did suspect anything, she’d have to ask herself why two strangers would drive through the rain to sit soaking on her couch and give her a medal if it wasn’t true?”

“Dramatic effect, huh?”

The passenger lit a cigarette and looked through the sheets of rain hitting the windshield. “The drama sells it.”