

"SHE SOUGHT POWER IN THE DARKNESS.
SHE FOUND FREEDOM IN THE LIGHT.



SATAN'S *Side* CHICK

A
CHRISTIAN NOVEL

DR. PAUL CRAWFORD

A STORY OF DECEPTION, DELIVERANCE, AND DIVINE REDEMPTION

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A Christian Novel

By Dr. Paul Crawford

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Preface

When I first began writing **Satan's Side Chick**, I knew the title would capture attention. Some may even find it shocking. That is intentional—not to glorify darkness, but to expose it.

This is not a story about the power of Satan. It is a story about the greater power of Jesus Christ.

Throughout Scripture, we are reminded that our battle is not merely against flesh and blood, but against spiritual forces of evil that seek to deceive, enslave, and destroy. The enemy has not changed his methods. He continues to disguise lies as truth, bondage as freedom, and darkness as light. While the names and practices may change from one generation to another, his objective remains the same: to lead people away from the saving grace of God.

In recent years, interest in witchcraft, tarot cards, spirit guides, astrology, crystal healing, séances, and other occult practices has grown dramatically. What many dismiss as harmless entertainment or spiritual curiosity can become an open door to profound deception. The Bible consistently warns God's people to avoid these practices—not because God wishes to withhold something good from us, but because He desires to protect us from spiritual harm.

Ali Gibson is a fictional character, but her spiritual journey reflects the very real struggles of countless people searching for meaning, identity, purpose, and power. Many begin with sincere questions, only to find themselves entangled in beliefs and practices that leave them more empty, fearful, and broken than before.

Yet this novel is not about despair.

It is about hope.

No life is too shattered for God's grace. No sin is too great for Christ's forgiveness. No chain forged by the enemy is too strong for the cross of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel is the greatest rescue story ever told.

Jesus Christ entered a world imprisoned by sin, conquered death through His crucifixion and resurrection, and offers forgiveness and eternal life to all who repent and believe in Him. His victory is complete. His mercy is limitless. His invitation remains open.

As you journey through these pages, you will encounter moments of suspense, spiritual conflict, heartbreak, and redemption. My prayer is that this story will not merely entertain you but encourage you to look beyond the fictional narrative to the eternal truths found in God's Word.

If you are a believer, may this novel remind you that Christ is victorious over every force of darkness and that His light still shines in a world desperately in need of hope.

If you have wandered from God, may you discover that His arms remain open, ready to receive all who turn to Him in repentance and faith.

And if you have never trusted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, it is my sincere prayer that the testimony woven throughout this story will point you to the One who said, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life."* He alone can forgive sin, break spiritual bondage, and give everlasting life.

Thank you for allowing me to share this story with you. My prayer is that when you reach the final page, you will not remember the darkness nearly as much as you remember the Light that overcame it.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." — John 1:5

May the Lord bless you as you read.

In His Service,

Dr. Paul Crawford

Prologue

The Invitation to Darkness

The room smelled of melted candle wax and burnt sage.

Twenty-three black candles flickered in a perfect circle, their flames dancing as though moved by an invisible breath. Thick crimson curtains covered every window, shutting out the moonlight. Strange symbols had been painted onto the wooden floor, and in the center of the room knelt a young woman whose trembling hands betrayed the confidence she desperately tried to project.

Ali Gibson.

Her eyes remained fixed on the ancient leather-bound book resting on the altar before her.

"This is the final step," the woman leading the ceremony whispered. "Once you speak the words, there is no turning back."

Ali swallowed hard.

She had spent months preparing for this night.

Months studying forbidden books.

Months learning ancient rituals.

Months convincing herself that the God of the Bible was nothing more than a fairy tale created to keep people weak.

Power—that was real.

She had seen it.

She had felt it.

She believed she could control it.

The others surrounding the circle lowered their heads and began chanting in a language Ali did not understand. Their voices blended into one haunting rhythm that echoed through the old house like distant thunder.

The air suddenly became heavy.

The candle flames stretched unnaturally high.

A cold wind swept through the sealed room.

Ali looked toward the windows.

They hadn't moved.

No door had opened.

Yet something had entered.

Every instinct told her to run.

Instead, she opened the book.

Her fingers trembled as she read the first line aloud.

The instant the final word escaped her lips, every candle went out.

Darkness swallowed the room.

Someone screamed.

Then silence.

Absolute silence.

Moments later, one candle reignited by itself.

Its pale flame revealed faces frozen in terror.

Not one person was looking at Ali.

They were staring behind her.

Slowly...

Almost unwillingly...

Ali turned.

She expected to see another member of the coven.

Instead, she saw only darkness.

But within that darkness she sensed an intelligence—cold, calculating, and utterly devoid of love.

For one terrifying moment, she understood the truth.

Whatever had answered was not a friend.

It never had been.

Then a voice, barely louder than a whisper, drifted through the room.

"You belong to me."

Ali tried to scream.

Nothing came out.

The darkness rushed toward her.

Everything disappeared.

Three years later...

Sunlight poured through the stained-glass windows of a small country church.

The congregation sat in complete silence as a woman stepped to the pulpit, holding a worn Bible against her chest.

Few would have recognized her.

The black robes were gone.

The symbols had disappeared.

The fear that had once ruled her eyes had been replaced by peace.

She smiled through grateful tears.

"My name is Ali Gibson."

She paused, looking across the sanctuary.

"There was a time when I believed Satan could give me everything I wanted."

She held up her Bible.

"I was wrong."

"Tonight I'm going to tell you how Jesus Christ rescued me from the kingdom of darkness."

The room became still.

Every eye remained fixed on her.

Her story was not merely about escaping witchcraft.

It was about the relentless mercy of God.

Because no chain forged in hell is stronger than the cross of Jesus Christ.

And this...

...is that story.

"She thought she had found power. Instead, she found chains. Only one Savior could break them."

Chapter 1 – The Empty Places

The trailer at the end of Miller's Creek Road smelled like cigarette smoke and spoiled milk, and Ali Gibson had learned by the age of six to sleep with her shoes on.

Not because she planned to run — though later, much later, she would run more times than she could count — but because a six-year-old who slept with her shoes on could be ready in thirty seconds if her mother's boyfriend came home loud. Ready to slip out the back door into the row of dead cornstalks behind the trailer park. Ready to lie flat in the ditch until the shouting stopped, or the sound of something breaking stopped, or the sound of her mother crying stopped, whichever came last.

She was good at waiting in ditches. She had gotten a lot of practice.

Twenty-six years later, Ali still could not fall asleep with her feet uncovered. Marcus used to tease her about it, back when there had been a Marcus, back when there had been anyone who noticed the small architecture of a person's fear. "You expecting a fire drill?" he'd ask, watching her burrow her feet under the blanket like a woman bracing for a call to arms. She never told him the truth. She barely let herself remember the truth in the daylight, let alone hand it to a man who would eventually leave anyway, the way they all eventually left.

But some nights, when Nashville's traffic hummed low outside her apartment window and the ceiling fan ticked its uneven tick, the ditch came back to her whether she invited it or not. She would lie in the dark of her one-bedroom apartment on Elysian Fields Lane — she had picked the apartment partly for the name, some old wound in her hoping an address like that might mean something — and she would feel six years old again, waiting for the shouting to stop.



Ali's mother, Renee Gibson, was twenty when Ali was born and thirty-one when she finally stopped trying to be a mother altogether. In between those years she tried on a rotation of men the way other women tried on shoes — testing whether this one, finally, might be the one who stayed, who paid the light bill, who didn't hit, who loved her enough that the man before him would stop being the story she told herself about herself.

None of them stayed. Ali remembered them mostly as absences shaped like men — a recliner that used to have someone in it, a pickup truck that stopped being in the driveway, a voice that yelled and then one day simply wasn't there to yell anymore, leaving behind a silence that somehow felt worse.

Except for Dale.

Dale Whitfield stayed four years, longer than any of them, which made him, in the twisted arithmetic of Ali's childhood, the closest thing she had to a father. He taught her to ride a bike in the gravel lot behind the trailer, holding the back of the banana seat and running alongside her until she found her balance, laughing in a way that made something in her chest unclench for the length of an afternoon. He called her "Little Bit." He bought her a Happy Meal on her eighth birthday because Renee had forgotten, and told her, around a mouthful of his own burger, that she was going to grow up to be somebody.

He also came into her room three times between the ages of nine and ten, and told her both times that if she said anything, her mother would blame her, not him, because that was how it always went with mothers and daughters, and he was the only reason there was still a roof over their heads.

Ali believed him. She was nine. Believing him was easier than testing whether he was right, and some silent, calculating part of her — the part that had already learned to read a room the way other children learned to read picture books — suspected he might be.

She never told. Not when he left two years later, driving off in the pickup truck with a woman named Crystal in the passenger seat and half of Renee's jewelry in a duffel bag on the floorboard. Not when Renee cried for a week and then blamed Ali for "driving him off" with her sullenness, her attitude, her refusal to call him Dad like he'd asked. Not when Ali turned fourteen and started cutting thin red lines into the soft skin of her upper thigh with a razor blade pried from a disposable, because it was the only place she had discovered where the pain made sense — pain she chose, pain with an edge and a beginning and an end, unlike the pain that arrived unannounced through a bedroom door in the dark.

Not until she was seventeen, sitting across from a school counselor named Mrs. Okafor who had noticed the long sleeves in August, did anything come out at all. And even then it came out sideways, in fragments, the way confessions do when the person confessing has spent her whole life being taught that her pain was an inconvenience to other people.

Mrs. Okafor was kind. Mrs. Okafor called the appropriate people, filled out the appropriate forms, and for six months Ali sat in a state-appointed therapist's office twice a month describing her feelings in the flattened, careful language of a girl who had learned that too much honesty got you labeled troubled, and too little got you sent back to whatever situation had troubled you in the first place.

Nothing came of Dale. He was three states away by then, and old accusations against absent men rarely survived contact with a legal system already buckling under a thousand louder, newer cases. Ali understood, even at seventeen, that there would be no reckoning, no courtroom scene where someone

in a robe declared what had happened to her unforgivable and made someone pay for it. There would only be the quiet closing of a file, and a counselor's kind, tired eyes, and the singular fact she would carry the rest of her life: that when it mattered most, no one had come.



She asked God about it exactly once.

She was fifteen, and it was a Wednesday, because Wednesday nights were church nights at Grace Fellowship, the small Baptist congregation two blocks from the trailer park that Ali attended sporadically with her friend Denise's family, mostly because Denise's mother made real dinner afterward and Ali was always hungry for more than food.

The youth pastor that night — a well-meaning twenty-six-year-old named Kyle with a guitar and a habit of saying "authentic" and "intentional" in every third sentence — had preached on Romans 8:28, that all things work together for good to those who love God. He'd said it with the easy confidence of a man who had never had to test the verse against anything sharper than a bad grade or a breakup.

Ali had sat in the back row, arms crossed over the sleeves that covered her arms even in July, and when the room emptied for refreshments, she stayed in her seat and, for reasons she never fully understood afterward, closed her eyes and prayed for the first time in her life with anything like sincerity.

God, she prayed. If you're real, and if you're good, then explain it to me. Explain the ditch. Explain Dale's hand on the doorknob. Explain why You let a nine-year-old learn what she learned, and then explain why nobody — not my mother, not a single living soul — ever came when I needed them to come. If you're up there and you're powerful enough to make the whole world, you were powerful enough to make him stop. So why didn't you?

She waited. The fellowship hall smelled like coffee and the casserole dishes Denise's mother was already setting out. Somewhere a folding chair scraped against linoleum. The silence stretched out, ordinary and unremarkable, indistinguishable from the silence of any empty room.

Nothing answered her. No verse rose unbidden to her mind, no warmth, no still small voice, nothing but the hum of the ancient window unit laboring against the July heat and Kyle's laughter from the kitchen as he told somebody a story about his college roommate.

Ali opened her eyes, and something inside her — something that had been holding a door open, waiting, hoping — quietly closed. She did not decide, in that moment, that God did not exist. She was not sophisticated enough yet for atheism, and some vestigial habit of belief clung to her the way an accent clings to someone who has moved away from home. What she decided, with the flat, exhausted

clarity of a fifteen-year-old who had run out of hope to spend, was simpler and in some ways more dangerous: that God, if He was there at all, did not care. That whatever attention He gave the world, it did not reach as far as a trailer at the end of Miller's Creek Road. That she was, and had always been, on her own.

She never went back to Grace Fellowship after that summer. Denise's family moved away the following spring, and with them went Ali's last tether to church, casseroles, guitars, and a God she had already quietly filed under Does Not Apply To Me.



She left home at eighteen with a duffel bag, four hundred dollars saved from a job at a Dollar General, and a fierce, undernourished determination to become somebody — Dale's old promise, ironically, was the one thing he'd said that stuck, though she scrubbed his voice out of the memory and kept only the ambition.

Nashville swallowed her the way it swallowed thousands of restless young women every year, all of them arriving with some version of the same hunger. Ali did not come chasing a record deal or an acting career. She came chasing the simpler, more elemental thing underneath those dreams: to matter. To be seen by someone and found valuable. To walk into a room and have it register that she was in it.

She worked. God, how she worked. Front desk at a boutique hotel downtown, then a leasing office, then eventually a marketing coordinator position at a mid-sized healthcare staffing company that paid enough for the apartment on Elysian Fields Lane and a car that mostly started on the first try. She was, by every external measure, a young professional doing fine. She had a LinkedIn photo where she looked confident. She had a rotation of brunch friends who complimented her outfits. She had, for two and a half years, Marcus, a sales rep with a nice smile and an allergy to commitment who told her, when he finally left, that she was "a lot," which she understood to mean too much — too needy, too watchful, too quick to test whether he would still be there in the morning, because some ancient unhealed part of her kept expecting everyone to eventually be Dale, or her mother, or one more truck pulling out of one more driveway.

He wasn't wrong, exactly. That was the part that hurt worst. She recognized herself in his accusation even as it flattened her, even as she sat on her closet floor that night with her back against the hanging clothes, unable to cry, because crying was a thing she had trained herself out of somewhere around age eleven and the skill, once lost, did not return easily.

What Marcus never knew, what none of them ever knew, was the arithmetic Ali ran constantly behind her competent, well-dressed exterior. Every relationship, every friendship, every job, was a

hypothesis: If I am impressive enough, if I am useful enough, if I am pretty enough, agreeable enough, low-maintenance enough — will you stay? Will this be the time someone stays?

The hypothesis kept failing. Not because the people in her life were monstrous — most of them were simply ordinary, flawed, self-interested people doing what ordinary self-interested people do — but because Ali was, without knowing the theological word for it, running a bottomless deficit. She was trying to fill a hole shaped like being unconditionally wanted using tools that could only ever offer conditional approval. Compliments evaporated by morning. A promotion at work gave her four good days and then the old hunger crept back in, sharper for having been briefly fed. Even sex, which she had used since her early twenties the way other people used a substance, left her feeling more alone afterward than before, because it always, eventually, confirmed the same quiet verdict: wanted for an hour, not kept.

She had read enough self-help books to have language for this. She knew the phrase attachment wound. She knew the phrase seeking external validation. She had even, during a brief and expensive stint of therapy in her mid-twenties, said the words out loud to a counselor named Diane — not the same Diane, a different one, an ordinary licensed clinical social worker in an office park off Franklin Road — that she did not think she would ever feel like enough.

"What would enough feel like?" the therapist had asked her.

Ali remembered sitting with that question for a long time, staring at the abstract painting on the office wall, some swirl of blues that was supposed to be calming.

"I don't know," she'd finally said. "I don't think I've ever felt it. Not for one day of my whole life."



By twenty-eight, Ali had stopped going to that therapist — the co-pay was steep and the insights, however accurate, did not seem to be changing anything, and there is only so long a person can pay to be told the shape of her own wound without eventually wanting someone to actually stitch it. She had also stopped, some years back, thinking much about God at all. He had become like a language she'd once spoken as a small child in another country — present somewhere in her, structurally, but unused so long it had begun to fade into vague impressions rather than working vocabulary. Christmas. Easter. A cross on a keychain her grandmother had given her, which Ali kept in a drawer without quite being able to throw it away, and without quite being able to wear it either.

If asked directly — and almost no one asked directly, because Nashville's version of small talk rarely veered into metaphysics before the second round of drinks — Ali would have described herself as spiritual but not religious, a phrase she'd picked up somewhere and found comfortably vague, roomy

enough to mean almost anything. She believed, in some diffuse way, that there was more to the universe than what could be measured. She did not believe that whatever that more was had any particular interest in her, or any particular moral character, or any particular claim on her behavior. The God of Grace Fellowship — the God who was supposed to work all things together for good — had, in her estimation, either never existed or had long ago stopped showing up for His shift. Either way, the practical result was the same. She was on her own, and she had been on her own since she was old enough to sleep in her shoes.

What Ali could not have said, because she had no framework for saying it, was that this was not a neutral conclusion. It was not the disinterested finding of an impartial observer weighing evidence. It was a verdict reached by an exhausted, wounded fifteen-year-old in an empty fellowship hall, and it had calcified, over thirteen years, into something closer to bedrock than belief — something she no longer examined because she had stopped noticing it was there at all, the way a person stops noticing the low hum of a refrigerator until the power goes out and the silence startles them.

The hole did not close on its own. If anything, it widened with every year that passed without anyone filling it, the way water widens a crack in stone. Ali filled the widening space the only way she knew how: with striving. With a work ethic her manager praised in every review. With a closet full of clothes bought to project the version of herself she wished were true. With a string of relationships that all followed the same arc — hope, hunger, disappointment, departure — until she'd begun to suspect, in her darker moments, that she was simply built wrong. Defective somewhere at the factory. Unlovable in some fundamental, structural way that no achievement or beauty routine or self-help book could repair.

She had never once considered — because no one had ever framed it to her this way — that the emptiness she carried was not proof there was nothing to fill it, but evidence of a shape. That a hole is not a flaw in a wall; it is the exact negative impression of something that used to fit there, or was always meant to.



The autumn Ali turned twenty-nine, three things happened within a span of six weeks, and though she did not know it then, all three were doors, and she was about to walk through the wrong one first.

The first was her mother's death.

Renee Gibson had spent the last decade of her life in and out of a rotating cast of boyfriends' apartments and, eventually, a small rental outside Chattanooga, drinking with a steadiness that Ali had watched from a careful, self-protective distance for years, sending money when she could, visiting rarely, always leaving those visits feeling like she'd donated a pint of blood she couldn't spare. Renee

died of liver failure on a Tuesday in September, alone in that rental, found two days later by a neighbor who noticed her mail piling up.

Ali flew to Chattanooga to handle the arrangements because there was no one else to do it. She sat through a funeral attended by eleven people, four of whom she didn't recognize, and delivered no eulogy because she found, standing at the small lectern with a folded index card in her hand, that she could not locate a single sentence that was both true and kind, and she refused to be the daughter who stood over her mother's casket and lied.

She flew home to Nashville that same week feeling nothing so much as a vast, ringing absence — not grief, exactly, though there was grief tangled somewhere inside it, but something closer to the vertigo of realizing the last living link to her childhood, however damaged, however unreliable, was now permanently gone. There would be no reconciliation scene. No mother, in some imagined future decade, finally sober and finally sorry, finally asking the question Ali had waited her whole life to be asked: Are you okay? Did I hurt you? I'm sorry. That door, which Ali had not realized she was still holding a sliver open, closed all at once and forever, and the finality of it hollowed her out in a way she hadn't braced for.

The second thing was smaller, almost absurd in comparison, and yet it lodged in her like a splinter: she was passed over for a promotion at work that she had been all but promised, in favor of a colleague two years her junior whose father golfed with the regional VP. Her manager delivered the news with an apologetic softness that made it worse, not better — the particular cruelty of being told, gently, that the game had never been about merit at all.

The third thing was a woman named Diane Whitcombe.



Ali met her at a candle shop.

It was the kind of shop that had proliferated across gentrifying Nashville neighborhoods in recent years — reclaimed wood shelving, hand-poured soy candles with names like Moonrise and Sacred Grove, a rack of crystals near the register that Ali had always assumed were purely decorative, aesthetic props for a certain kind of Instagram photo rather than objects anyone took seriously. She had wandered in on a gray Saturday two weeks after her mother's funeral, not shopping for anything in particular, drawn mostly by the shop's window display and a vague, aimless need to be somewhere that wasn't her apartment, where the silence had taken on a weight since the funeral that she didn't yet have words for.

The woman behind the counter was perhaps sixty, with silver hair worn loose and long past her shoulders, dressed in a way that managed to look both effortless and expensive — a deep green wrap dress, a collection of rings on nearly every finger, each stone different, each one, Ali would later learn, chosen with intention. She had the kind of unhurried, settled presence that Ali associated, from a distance, with people who had figured something out that she hadn't. She was refilling a display of amethyst clusters when Ali walked in, and she looked up with an attention so immediate and so warm that Ali felt something in her chest do the thing it always did around people who seemed genuinely glad to see her — a small, hopeful lurch, quickly suppressed, because hope had burned her too many times to be trusted at first contact.

"You look like you're carrying something," the woman said, not as a sales pitch, not as small talk, but with a directness that stopped Ali in the doorway.

"Excuse me?"

"I don't mean anything strange by it." The woman set down the amethyst she was holding and came around the counter, and up close her eyes were a pale, unusual gray-green, and they held Ali's gaze without any of the polite flicker-away that strangers usually managed. "I've just been doing this a long time. Reading rooms. Reading people. You walked in here like a woman who's been holding her breath for years and doesn't remember what it feels like to let it out."

Ali should have found this presumptuous. Later — much later, after everything — she would understand that it was, in fact, a technique, a practiced opening line refined over years on exactly the kind of grief-soft, exhausted young women who wandered into shops like this one looking for they-didn't-know-what. But in the moment, standing in the doorway with her mother eleven days buried and a promotion given to someone else's son and a silence in her apartment that had started to feel less like solitude and more like abandonment, the words landed on Ali like the first rain after a long drought.

"I just lost my mom," Ali heard herself say, which she had not said to a single person outside of the funeral home and her manager, who'd needed the information to approve her bereavement leave. She had not said it to her brunch friends. She had not said it to anyone who might have actually wanted to sit with her in it.

The woman's face changed — softened further, if that was possible — and she reached out and took both of Ali's hands in both of hers, unhesitating, warm-palmed, and said, "Oh, honey. I'm so sorry. Come sit down. I'll make you tea, and you don't have to talk if you don't want to. Sometimes it's enough just to not be alone with it for a minute."

Her name, she said, pouring hot water over loose leaves in the back of the shop a few minutes later, was Diane Whitcombe, though most people who came to her for readings called her Lady Diane,

a title she offered with a small, self-deprecating laugh, as if she knew exactly how it sounded and had made her peace with it decades ago. She had owned the shop, The Sacred Ember, for eleven years. Before that, she said, she had spent most of her life "in the corporate grind," a phrase she delivered with faint contempt, "chasing the things everyone tells you will make you happy. Money. Titles. A husband who turned out to care more about his golf handicap than about me." She said this last part lightly, without visible bitterness, the practiced lightness of someone who had told the story many times and long ago stripped it of its power to wound her.

"What changed?" Ali asked, cradling the warm mug, grateful simply to be sitting somewhere that smelled like sandalwood instead of the particular emptiness of her own apartment.

"I found something that actually worked," Diane said. "Not empty promises. Not somebody else's rulebook telling me what I was supposed to believe on faith, with nothing to show for it. I found a path that gave me real results. Real answers. Real power over my own life, instead of just hoping some distant, silent God might notice me down here and decide to intervene." She smiled, and there was something almost maternal in it, something that reached directly for the exact wound Ali had been carrying since she was fifteen years old in an empty fellowship hall. "I stopped waiting for permission from a universe that never seemed to answer, and I started asking it questions instead. And it answers, Ali. If you ask the right way. It answers every time."

Ali did not remember, later, exactly when she had told Diane her name. It didn't occur to her in the moment to wonder. She only remembered the strange, unfamiliar sensation of being looked at by someone who seemed to actually see her — not the competent, put-together marketing coordinator she performed at work, not the low-maintenance girlfriend she'd tried and failed to be for Marcus, not even the dutiful, guilty daughter she'd been at her mother's funeral, but some deeper, hungrier version of herself that she rarely let anyone near. Diane looked at that version and did not flinch. Diane looked at that version and called it interesting. Worth talking to. Worth an entire pot of tea on a slow Saturday afternoon.

When Ali finally left the shop two hours later, the gray day outside had turned to a fine, cold drizzle, and she stood under the awning buttoning her coat with a small paper bag in her hand — a single candle, Moonrise, that Diane had pressed on her "as a gift, not a sale, sweetheart, I don't do that with people I like" — and a business card with The Sacred Ember's logo, a crescent moon cradling a star, and a handwritten note on the back in looping cursive: Thursday, 7pm. Just us. I think you're ready for something more.

Ali did not, in that moment, understand what she was ready for, or what Diane meant by more. She only knew that for the first time since the funeral — for the first time, if she was honest, in longer than

she could easily calculate — someone had looked directly at the empty places inside her and not looked away.

She told herself, walking to her car through the thin rain, that it was just tea. Just a nice older woman being kind to a grieving stranger. Nothing more than that.

But she kept the card. She did not throw it away, the way she'd been unable to throw away her grandmother's cross all those years earlier, and some quiet, watchful part of her — the part that had learned at age six to sleep with her shoes on, always alert for the sound of a door about to open — some part of her already knew that Thursday at seven o'clock, she would be there.

She had spent twenty-nine years searching the empty places of her life for something, anything, powerful enough to fill them, and no one — not a mother, not a father-shaped man who had betrayed her trust before she was old enough to understand what trust was, not a distant and silent God who had let a nine-year-old girl bear what she bore alone — no one had ever come when she needed them to come.

Ali Gibson did not yet know that on Thursday, at seven o'clock, in the back room of a shop that smelled like sandalwood and smoke, something would finally answer. She only knew that she was tired — tired in a way that went down to the marrow — of being the one who always had to knock, and no one on the other side of the door.

What she could not have known, standing in the rain with a candle in a paper bag and a stranger's handwriting in her pocket, was that something had, in fact, been watching her for a very long time. Not with love. Not with the patient, searching love that had waited outside her heart's door since she was fifteen years old in a Baptist fellowship hall, waited through the ditches and the counselor's office and Marcus's leaving and her mother's grave, waited without forcing its way in because it does not force its way in, ever, no matter how long the waiting takes.

Something else had been watching her too. Something that did not wait patiently, and did not ask permission, and had been drawn, the way certain things are always drawn, to the precise shape and weight of an empty place — sensing, the moment Ali Gibson walked into a candle shop on a gray September Saturday, that it had finally found a door standing open.

Chapter 2 – A Taste of Forbidden Power

Ali almost didn't go.

She spent Thursday afternoon at her desk composing and deleting three separate text messages to Kayla, her closest brunch friend, trying to describe the invitation in a way that didn't sound insane. A

candle shop owner gave me her card and invited me to something Thursday night, she typed, and then deleted it, because typed out and looked at directly, the sentence sounded exactly like the opening line of the true-crime podcasts she half-listened to on her commute — the ones that always began with some ordinary woman meeting a stranger who seemed, at first, extraordinarily kind.

But then she would look at the little card sitting propped against her monitor, the crescent moon cradling its star, Diane's looping cursive across the back — Thursday, 7pm. Just us. I think you're ready for something more — and she would feel again the warmth of Diane's hands closing around hers in the back of the shop, the first time in longer than she could remember that another human being had looked at her grief without flinching from it, without changing the subject, without glancing at a watch.

That was the thing nobody warned you about loneliness, Ali had learned over the years: it did not make you cautious. It made you reckless in exactly the wrong direction. A person starving for food eventually loses the luxury of asking too many questions about what's on the plate.

At six-forty, she stood in her bathroom mirror trying on three different outfits before settling on jeans and a soft gray sweater, telling her reflection this was ridiculous, it was tea and conversation with a nice woman, not a date, not a decision, nothing that couldn't be walked back with a polite excuse if it turned out to be strange. She told herself this the whole drive across town, past the church marquees advertising Wednesday night AWANA and a "Fall Into Grace" sermon series, past the strip malls glowing gold in the last of the daylight, and she believed herself almost all the way to the parking space outside The Sacred Ember, where the shop's front windows had gone dark and a single lamp glowed warm in the back.



Diane answered the door herself, dressed down from the wrap dress of Saturday into something more casual — soft black pants, a loose ivory blouse, her silver hair pulled back — and yet somehow the effect was less ordinary, not more, as if the version of her that ran the cash register during business hours was the costume, and this was closer to what lay underneath.

"You came," Diane said, and the warmth in it was so immediate, so unguarded, that Ali felt the last of her hesitation loosen in her chest. "I wasn't sure you would. Most people talk themselves out of the things that would actually help them."

The shop, closed and unlit in the front, was different at night — the shelves of candles and crystals cast in long shadows, the amethyst cluster in the window catching the streetlight in a way that looked, for one disorienting second, almost like it was glowing from within. Diane led her past the register, through a curtain of dark beads Ali hadn't noticed on her first visit, into a back room that made Ali stop in the doorway.

It was small, maybe the size of Ali's bedroom, and it had clearly been built for exactly this purpose. A round table draped in deep purple velvet sat at the center, a single fat white candle burning at its middle, already lit, already waiting, as though Diane had known with certainty Ali would come and had set the room accordingly. Shelves lined the walls — more crystals, organized this time not by price point but by some system Ali didn't recognize, labeled in small brass placards: Rose Quartz — Love & Healing. Black Tourmaline — Protection. Selenite — Cleansing & Clarity. A large framed print hung on the far wall, an intricate wheel of images Ali would later learn was called the Wheel of Fortune, one card among many in something called the Major Arcana. Bundles of dried herbs hung upside down from a low beam, filling the room with an earthy, smoky sweetness that reminded Ali, not unpleasantly, of incense at a yoga studio she'd tried once and never returned to.

"Sit," Diane said, gesturing to one of two velvet-cushioned chairs at the round table, and Ali sat, feeling the particular self-consciousness of a person entering a ritual she doesn't yet understand the rules of.

"I should tell you," Diane said, settling into the chair across from her and folding her ringed hands on the table, "that nothing that happens in this room is going to hurt you. I know how that sounds — like something a con artist says right before she cons you." A small, warm laugh. "But I've been doing this a long time, Ali, and I've watched a lot of frightened, grieving women walk through that curtain, and every single one of them walked out lighter than she walked in. That's all I want for you tonight. To walk out lighter."

"I don't really know what tonight is," Ali admitted.

"Tonight is just a conversation," Diane said. "With some help." She reached beneath the velvet tablecloth and produced a deck of cards, larger and thicker than a standard playing deck, wrapped in a square of black silk that she unwound with unhurried, ceremonial care. "Have you ever had your cards read?"

"No." Ali eyed the deck the way she might eye an unfamiliar dog — not afraid, exactly, but alert. "Is it — I mean, is this like fortune-telling? Like a boardwalk thing?"

"It can be that cheap, if that's who's holding the cards," Diane said, unbothered by the comparison. "In the wrong hands, tarot is a parlor trick. In the right hands, it's a mirror. The cards don't tell your future the way a crystal ball in a movie does, sweetheart. They give shape to what you already know but haven't let yourself look at directly. Think of it less as fortune-telling and more as — " she considered, turning her rings absently, " — a very old, very beautiful form of therapy. With better lighting."

Ali almost smiled at that. It was, she would think later, the moment the last of her guard came down — not the candlelight, not the crystals, not even the warmth in Diane's voice, but the small, human joke that made the whole strange room feel suddenly less foreign and more like sitting across from a friend.

"Shuffle," Diane said, sliding the deck across the velvet. "As long as you'd like. Think about your life right now — not any question in particular, just the general shape of where you are. When it feels right, stop."

Ali shuffled the deck, feeling foolish, feeling the thick unfamiliar cards slide against each other under her fingers, thinking about her mother's funeral, about Marcus's back as he carried the last box out of her apartment, about the promotion given to someone else, about the ceiling fan ticking over her bed at night. She stopped when something in her, some instinct she couldn't name, told her to stop.

Diane took the deck back with both hands, cut it once, and began laying cards face-down on the velvet in a shape Ali didn't recognize — a cross, then a column beside it, six cards total.

"This is called the Celtic Cross," Diane said. "It's old. Older than either of us, older than most things people think are old." She rested her fingers on the first card without turning it. "This one is you. Where you are right now." She flipped it.

The card showed a woman standing at the edge of a cliff, blindfolded, holding two crossed swords, eight more swords planted in the ground around her like a cage.

Ali stared at it. Something in the image — the blindfold, the swords hemming the woman in on every side while her feet, if she looked closely, weren't actually bound at all, weren't actually trapped, just standing very still as though trapped — landed somewhere low in Ali's chest.

"Eight of Swords," Diane said, unsurprised, as though the card had simply confirmed something she already suspected. "This is a woman who believes she has no options. Who has convinced herself, over a long time, that she is stuck — trapped by circumstances, by people, by a past she didn't choose. But look at her feet, Ali. Look closely."

"They're not tied," Ali said quietly.

"They're not tied," Diane agreed. "The cage is real. The trap is not. Does that mean anything to you?"

Ali did not answer right away. She thought of the trailer at the end of Miller's Creek Road, of the ditch, of Dale's hand on the doorknob, of the counselor's office, of the empty fellowship hall, of thirteen years of quietly believing herself simply broken, built wrong at the factory, unlovable in some

structural way no amount of striving could repair. She thought of how completely, how totally, she had accepted the cage as permanent.

"Yeah," she said, and her voice came out smaller than she intended. "It means something."

Diane turned the next card without comment — a tower struck by lightning, two figures falling from its heights — and Ali flinched before Diane even spoke.

"That looks bad," Ali said.

"It looks dramatic," Diane corrected gently. "The Tower isn't punishment, whatever people online will tell you. It's demolition before rebuilding. Something in your life that you've been holding onto out of habit, not health, is about to come down — or has already started coming down. A structure that was never actually load-bearing, just familiar." Her pale eyes flicked up to Ali's face, reading it the way she'd read the doorway of the shop three days earlier. "You lost your mother recently."

Ali went very still. She had told Diane this, of course — she had said it herself, unprompted, standing in the doorway on Saturday. It was not, strictly, a supernatural leap. And yet something about hearing it come back to her now, framed inside the ceremony of the cards, laid alongside a tower struck by lightning, made the hair rise on Ali's arms in a way that ordinary conversation never had.

"How did you—"

"You told me, honey," Diane said, not unkindly, seeing the question form. "Saturday. But the cards knew before you said a word to me tonight. That's the difference between a psychic and a fraud — a fraud needs the information handed to her. The cards, and whatever moves through them, don't need anything handed to them at all."

She turned three more cards in silence — a woman surrounded by cups, looking away from three that had spilled toward two still standing; a man walking away from a stack of coins under a darkening sky; a card that showed, simply, a crowned figure enthroned, a lion at her feet — and with each one she spoke, unhurried, weaving Ali's actual life into the images with an accuracy that unsettled Ali more with every card.

The spilled cups: grief, but grief that was blinding her to what she still had. The man walking from the coins: a professional betrayal, recent, someone choosing someone else over her merit. ("They gave the position to someone less qualified," Diane said, not as a question, and Ali's stomach dropped, because she had told no one that detail, not even Kayla, not in those exact words.) The crowned woman: an untapped authority inside Ali that she had never been taught to access — a strength, Diane said, that Ali had spent her whole life mistaking for a wound.

By the sixth card, Ali's palms had gone damp against the velvet.

"How do you know all this?" she asked, and she heard in her own voice an unfamiliar note — not fear, not exactly, but something adjacent to it, a hunger sharpened by astonishment. "I haven't told you any of this. The promotion. I never told you about the promotion."

Diane studied her for a long moment before answering, and when she did, her voice had softened into something almost tender. "I don't know it, Ali. Not with my own mind. I'm just the one holding the cards. What speaks through them — call it intuition, call it the universe, call it whatever framework makes it easiest for you to hold — it doesn't come from me. It comes through me. There's a difference. And once you learn to open that same channel in yourself, it will come through you too."

"Through me?"

"You have it," Diane said, simply, as though remarking on the color of Ali's eyes. "I felt it the second you walked into my shop. Some people are just closed doors, Ali — good people, kind people, but closed, no draft coming through no matter how hard the wind blows outside. And then every so often someone walks in who is a door standing open. You are wide open, sweetheart. You have been your whole life. I imagine that's made things very hard for you — all that sensitivity, all that feeling, with no one to teach you what to do with it. But it also means you have access to things most people spend their whole lives trying and failing to reach."

Ali sat with that sentence longer than any sentence anyone had spoken to her in years. You have it. Not you are broken. Not you are too much, too needy, too watchful. You have it. A gift, not a deficiency. An explanation, finally, for the ceaseless, exhausting sensitivity that had cost her every relationship she'd ever tried to keep — reframed, in one evening, in one dim velvet-draped room, not as the reason she was unlovable but as evidence she was special.

She did not notice, because she had no framework yet for noticing, how precisely the compliment had been aimed. Diane had not guessed at Ali's wound through supernatural means. She had read it the way any skilled cold reader reads a grieving, love-starved young woman: the long sleeves, faded now but still a habit, that Ali tugged at her wrists without realizing; the flinch at the promotion question that told Diane exactly where to press; the particular quality of desperate gratitude in Ali's eyes every time Diane offered her undivided attention, the unmistakable signature of someone who had spent her whole life being only partially seen. None of it required a spirit. All of it required only patience, and a keen, practiced eye, and thirty years of watching exactly this kind of woman walk through exactly this kind of curtain.

But Ali did not know to look for the mechanism. She only knew that for two hours in a candlelit back room, a stranger had looked directly at the parts of her that everyone else had found exhausting, and had called them a gift.



Before Ali left that night, Diane sent her home with three things: a small polished stone of rose quartz, "for the grief, to help you hold it without letting it curdle into bitterness"; a printed sheet titled Basic Manifestation: Aligning Your Intentions with the Universe, three paragraphs of instructions about visualization, gratitude, and "vibrational frequency" that read, on the surface, almost indistinguishable from the self-help books already crowding Ali's shelf; and an invitation to come back the following Tuesday for what Diane called "a little gathering — nothing formal, just some women I know who share an interest in this kind of thing. I think you'd like them. I think, more than that, they'd like you."

Ali drove home with the rose quartz in her cupholder and the manifestation sheet on the passenger seat, and she noticed, pulling into her apartment complex, that for the first time since her mother's funeral, the dread that usually settled over her the moment she cut the engine — the dread of walking into an apartment that would be exactly as silent and exactly as empty as she'd left it — had not arrived. She sat in the dark parking lot for a moment, testing the absence the way you test a sore tooth with your tongue, and found, to her surprise, that it really was gone. Just for tonight. Just enough to notice its absence was even possible.

She told herself it was the tea. The company. Ordinary human comfort, nothing more mystical than that.

She almost believed it.



The manifestation exercise sat on her kitchen counter for four days before curiosity beat out self-consciousness. On Wednesday night, alone in her apartment with the lights dimmed the way the sheet instructed, Ali sat cross-legged on her living room floor, the rose quartz warm in her palm from being carried in her coat pocket all week, and read through the exercise one more time.

Write down what you want, the sheet said. Not what you think is realistic. Not what you think you deserve. What you actually want, without apology. Then close your eyes, hold the object of your intention, and feel — truly feel, in your body, not just your mind — as though you already have it. The universe does not respond to wishing. It responds to vibration. Match the frequency of the life you want, and the life you want will find you.

Ali took a sheet of notebook paper and, after a long moment of staring at the blank page — feeling, absurdly, embarrassed in the privacy of her own living room, as though someone might see her wanting things this nakedly — wrote three sentences.

I want to be seen for who I really am.

I want someone to choose me and mean it.

I want to stop feeling like I'm the only one carrying this.

She closed her eyes, held the rose quartz against her sternum the way the sheet described, and tried to feel it — the wanted, the chosen, the not-alone — tried to manufacture in her chest the sensation of having already received what she had spent twenty-nine years failing to receive. It was harder than it sounded. Her mind kept sliding sideways into skepticism, into the small dry voice that sounded uncomfortably like her old therapist asking what would enough feel like, into the flatly reasonable observation that holding a rock and imagining feelings had never once, in the documented history of the universe, changed anyone's actual circumstances.

And yet.

Three days later, her manager stopped by her desk to say that corporate had approved a new position — a senior coordinator role, created almost out of nowhere, restructured out of budget that apparently hadn't existed the week before — and asked, almost offhandedly, whether Ali would be interested in applying, adding that she'd already put in a strong word.

Three days after that, a message arrived from a number she didn't recognize: Marcus, after eight months of silence, writing to say he'd been thinking about her, that he'd made a mistake, that he wondered if she'd want to get coffee sometime and talk.

Ali sat with her phone in her hand for a long time after that second message, feeling something electric move through her chest, something that felt dangerously close to vindication. She told herself, in the calm analytical part of her mind that still functioned even in the grip of astonishment, that both of these things had perfectly ordinary explanations. Companies restructured budgets all the time for reasons that had nothing to do with candlelit intentions written on notebook paper. Exes reached back out; it was a known, unremarkable pattern, not a miracle. Correlation was not causation. She had learned that phrase in a college statistics class and had, until this week, considered it one of the more useful things she'd retained from four years of tuition.

But the timing.

The timing sat in her chest like a stone she couldn't put down, and every time she tried to reason her way past it, some hungrier, more primitive part of her — the part that had spent twenty-nine years watching every door in her life close, waiting for even one to open on its own — whispered a much simpler explanation. It worked.

She texted Diane that night, unable to help herself, uncertain even as she typed the words how to phrase something this strange without sounding unhinged. I did the exercise. Some things happened. I don't know how to explain it.

Diane's reply came within minutes, as though she'd been waiting.

I know exactly how to explain it, sweetheart. You finally started listening to yourself instead of everyone who taught you not to. Come Tuesday. I want you to meet the others.



The following Tuesday, Ali arrived at The Sacred Ember at seven-fifteen, later than she'd intended, having changed clothes twice and then, in the parking lot, having sat gripping her steering wheel for a full three minutes while the rational, careful part of her mind ran through every reason this might be a mistake — a phrase she'd typed into a search bar earlier that afternoon and then deleted before hitting enter: is it dangerous to do tarot readings.

The search results, she'd noticed in the half-second before she deleted the query, had been a chaotic mix — evangelical blog posts warning of demonic deception sitting right alongside wellness sites insisting tarot was simply a tool for self-reflection, no more sinister than journaling. She had not clicked on either kind of link. She told herself she didn't need to; she was an adult, capable of deciding for herself what was and wasn't dangerous, and nothing about drinking tea with a kind older woman and looking at pretty cards had felt, in the room, like danger. It had felt, if anything, like the opposite — like warmth, like being finally, finally understood.

She went in.

The back room held five women that night instead of two. Diane introduced them one by one as Ali settled into the last open chair around the velvet table, now ringed with candles instead of just the single one from before — a woman named Sabrina, maybe forty, sharp-eyed and quiet, who ran what Diane described only as "a wellness practice" out near Green Hills; a heavyset, laughing woman named Beth who Ali would later learn taught elementary school by day; a striking young woman not much older than Ali herself, introduced simply as Wren, who said almost nothing the entire evening but watched Ali with an attention that felt, even then, faintly proprietary, faintly evaluating, like a jeweler assessing a stone; and an older woman, silver-haired like Diane but harder around the eyes, named Corinne, who Ali would not learn until much later held a position of real authority in rooms far darker than this one.

"Ali's new," Diane said, by way of introduction, resting a hand briefly on Ali's shoulder. "She has a gift. I could feel it the moment she walked into the shop."

The evening that followed felt, on its surface, almost disappointingly ordinary — closer to a book club than anything Ali had built up in her nervous imagination on the drive over. They talked. They drank wine, and later, herbal tea. Sabrina walked Ali through the properties of a half-dozen crystals laid out on a square of black cloth, explaining which ones drew love, which ones deflected negative energy, which ones — this one, a smoky, faceted piece of obsidian — could be used, if a person was serious about it, to set a boundary against someone who meant her harm. Beth showed her a small leather journal filled with what she called "spell work," though the spells themselves, read aloud, sounded almost embarrassingly close to prayers Ali dimly remembered from childhood — petitions for protection, for clarity, for the removal of obstacles, addressed not to God but to something Beth referred to only as "the universe" or, occasionally, with a small private smile Ali didn't understand yet, "our friends on the other side."

At one point, Corinne produced a pendulum — a small quartz point suspended from a delicate silver chain — and demonstrated for Ali how to hold it steady over her open palm and ask it yes-or-no questions, watching for the direction of its swing.

"Ask it something," Corinne said, holding the chain out to Ali. "Something only you would know the answer to. See if it's honest with you."

Ali took the chain, feeling foolish, feeling the eyes of five women on her, and after a moment's hesitation, asked silently, in the privacy of her own mind: Did my mother love me, even if she never showed it?

The pendulum, which had hung motionless for a long beat, began — slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, then with gathering, unmistakable momentum — to swing in a small, steady circle.

"That's a yes," Corinne said softly, watching Ali's face rather than the pendulum. "A strong one."

Ali's eyes filled before she could stop them, and she hated herself a little for it, hated how quickly and how completely she wanted to believe a swinging piece of quartz over her own twenty-nine years of hard-won suspicion that her mother had, in fact, loved the men in her life and the bottle in her hand far more than she had ever loved her daughter. But want was a powerful solvent against suspicion, and in that candlelit room, surrounded by women who had welcomed her without hesitation, who called her gifted instead of too much, Ali let herself believe it, if only for the length of the evening.

She did not know — could not have known, with no framework yet for such things — that a pendulum swings in the direction its holder's own hand imperceptibly guides it, the tiniest of muscle movements amplified by a freely swinging chain into something that looks, to an untrained and desperate eye, uncannily like an answer from beyond. She did not know that Corinne had watched her face rather than the quartz for exactly that reason. She only knew that something, some current running

beneath the ordinary surface of the evening, had reached into the oldest ache she carried and, for one warm hour, soothed it.



Ali went back the next Tuesday. And the Tuesday after that.

Within a month, the small back room of The Sacred Ember had become the fixed point around which the rest of her week orbited — the thing she looked forward to on otherwise unremarkable Mondays, the reason she started declining Kayla's brunch invitations, first occasionally, then more often, telling herself she simply had other plans now, other people who understood her in ways her old friends never quite had. She learned to read the cards herself, clumsily at first and then with a fluency that surprised even her, laying out spreads for Beth and Sabrina and, once, nervously, for Wren, who watched her flip each card with that same unreadable, evaluating stillness and said, at the end, only, "You're faster than you should be, this early."

She learned to cleanse a room with burning sage, learned the names and correspondences of a dozen crystals, learned to write out intentions on strips of paper and burn them in a small brass dish while murmuring words Diane had taught her, words that felt, the first few times, silly in her mouth, and then, gradually, less silly — felt, if she was honest, faintly electric, as though the words themselves carried weight independent of her belief in them.

And the coincidences kept coming. A parking spot opening exactly when she needed one, after a rushed intention scribbled in her car. A difficult client relenting the same week she'd burned his name on a strip of paper along with a request for "smooth resolution." Marcus, true to his text, taking her to coffee and then, three weeks later, to dinner, circling back into her life with an attentiveness he had never shown her the first time around — an attentiveness Ali did not examine closely enough to notice how neatly it followed the shape of her own written intentions, how it arrived exactly when her hunger for it was sharpest, exactly when she was most primed to interpret it as proof.

She began to notice, too, smaller things that unsettled her in a register she couldn't quite name — a dream, more vivid than dreams usually were, in which a tall, faceless figure stood at the foot of her bed and did not move, did not speak, simply watched her the way Wren watched her, until she woke gasping, heart slamming, at 3:11 in the morning, a time that meant nothing to her then and would come, over the following months, to mean a great deal. A moment, weeks later, standing at her bathroom mirror brushing her teeth, when she caught — for less than a second, gone before she could turn her head fully — a second shape standing just behind her own reflection, there and then not there, so brief she convinced herself, toothbrush frozen halfway to her mouth, that it had been nothing but tired eyes and bad lighting.

She mentioned neither of these things to Diane. Some instinct, buried deep beneath the hunger and the gratitude and the intoxicating new sense of being special, told her that mentioning them would sound like doubt, and doubt, in the warm velvet room that had become the one place in her life she felt fully seen, was the one thing Ali could not afford to feel.

Because the truth, the truth she would not let herself examine too closely for months yet, was simpler and more dangerous than any dream or any shadow in a mirror: for the first time since she was six years old, sleeping in her shoes in a trailer at the end of Miller's Creek Road, Ali Gibson felt powerful. Not safe, exactly — safety was a feeling she suspected, some nights, she might never fully learn. But powerful. Chosen. Gifted. A door standing open, at long last, letting something in instead of watching, forever, from the outside.

She had spent twenty-nine years believing no one was listening.

Now, it seemed, something was.

She had not yet stopped to ask herself the one question that might have saved her months of what was coming — not whether the power was real, because by then she no longer doubted that it was, but whose it was, and what, in the end, it would cost her to keep it.

Chapter 3 – The First Spell

By October, Ali had a shelf.

It started small — the rose quartz Diane had given her that first night, propped on the windowsill above her kitchen sink — and grew, week by week, the way collections do when a person has stopped asking herself why she's collecting. Black tourmaline for protection, bought after Sabrina mentioned, almost offhandedly, that Ali's aura felt "a little porous lately, honey, like you're picking up everyone else's static." Selenite wands for cleansing, because Beth had explained that spaces held onto old grief the way carpet holds onto old smells, invisible until you knew to look for it. A small brass dish, blackened at the bottom from repeated use, for burning intentions written on strips of paper. A deck of her own tarot cards, purchased from The Sacred Ember at a "friends and family" discount Diane insisted on, the box now soft-cornered from handling.

By the time the leaves outside her apartment window had gone the color of rust, the shelf above Ali's kitchen sink held more objects of devotion than the small wooden cross her grandmother had given her, which remained, as it had for years, folded inside a drawer in her bedroom — out of sight,

though not, Ali would have insisted if anyone had asked, out of any particular conviction. She simply didn't think about it. There was no room left in her attention for a God who had never once, in twenty-nine years, answered when she called.

Something else, it seemed, was answering now.



The Tuesday gatherings had become something closer to a second job than a hobby, though Ali would not have used that word, because a job was something you did out of obligation, and nothing about the back room of The Sacred Ember felt like obligation. It felt like the only two hours of her week when she did not have to perform being fine. Kayla had stopped texting as often, which stung less than Ali expected; she found she preferred the company of women who called her gifted to the company of women who simply wanted brunch.

It was Diane who first raised the subject of a real spell.

"You've been doing exercises," Diane said one evening in mid-October, the six of them gathered as usual around the velvet table, candles burning low, the room thick with the smoky sweetness of burning herbs. "Manifestation, cleansing, a little divination. Training wheels, sweetheart. Do you feel ready to take them off?"

"What do you mean?" Ali asked, though something in her chest had already leaned forward, hungry, before Diane finished the question.

"I mean a real working," Diane said. "Intention is a whisper, Ali. A spell is a shout. There's a difference between hoping the universe hears you and making absolutely certain it does." She glanced around the table at the other women — Sabrina watching with her usual sharp stillness, Beth already smiling in anticipation, Corinne unreadable as always, Wren studying Ali with that same proprietary attention she'd worn since the first night, as though cataloguing something. "Is there anything in your life right now you want changed? Not vaguely. Specifically. Something you want gone, or something you want brought to you."

Ali did not have to think long.

She thought of Deborah Sykes, her manager, who had smiled with such practiced, apologetic softness the day she delivered the news about the promotion — the position that had gone, instead, to a twenty-six-year-old named Tyler whose father golfed with the regional VP, a fact Ali had confirmed for herself through the particular forensic diligence of the professionally wounded, scrolling LinkedIn connections and company newsletters until the shape of the injustice was unmistakable. She thought of the four months since, watching Tyler occupy the corner office that should have been hers, watching

him take credit in meetings for strategy she had built, watching Deborah's soft apologetic smile every single time Ali asked, with what she hoped read as professional curiosity rather than desperation, whether other opportunities might be opening up.

"I want it to stop being unfair," Ali said. "I did the work. I did everything right, and somebody else got what I earned because his father plays golf with the right person. I want — " she stopped, hearing how the sentence wanted to finish, and let it finish anyway, because the room, warm and candlelit and full of women who had never once flinched from her, felt like the one place left where she didn't have to sand her own edges down. "I want him to lose it. I want the universe to give it back to me the way it should have the first time."

Nobody at the table looked shocked. Beth nodded slowly, as though this were the most reasonable request in the world. Diane's pale eyes held something that might, in a different light, have looked like satisfaction.

"That's honest," Diane said. "Good. The old ways don't work on politeness, sweetheart. They work on truth." She reached beneath the table and produced a small carved wooden box Ali hadn't seen before, opening it to reveal a collection of items — a black candle, a length of black thread, a handful of dried herbs Ali didn't recognize, a small square of paper, and a pin. "This is a binding and reversal working. Very old. Very simple, if your intention is clear, and yours, tonight, could not be clearer."

She walked Ali through it with the patient, practical tone of someone teaching a recipe. Write the name — full name, if you have it, Ali, names carry weight — on the paper, along with what he took from you. Fold it three times, away from yourself. Wrap it in the black thread, binding what he has, so it can move no further in the wrong direction. Anoint the candle with the oil Sabrina passed across the table, a dark, resinous liquid that smelled of clove and something underneath the clove that Ali couldn't name. Speak the intention aloud, three times, while the candle burned down toward the paper.

"You're not asking him to be hurt," Diane clarified, seeing something cross Ali's face — not hesitation, exactly, but a flicker of the old fifteen-year-old who had once believed, however briefly, in a God who cared about fairness. "You're asking for balance. What was taken unjustly gets returned. That's not cruelty, Ali. That's justice finally doing its job."

Ali wrote Tyler's full name on the square of paper — she knew it from company directories, first, middle, last — and beneath it, in small, careful letters: What he took, give back. Let what is unearned fall away from him, as it should have from the start.

She folded the paper three times, away from herself, the way Diane instructed. She wrapped it in black thread, wrapping it seven times while Diane counted softly beside her. She lit the black candle with a long wooden match, and as the flame caught, something in the room changed — subtly at first, a

pressure Ali felt more than heard, like the moment before a thunderstorm when the air itself seems to thicken and lean inward. The other five women had gone quiet, watching her with an attention that felt, for the first time since Ali had joined them, less like warmth and more like witness.

"Speak it," Diane said softly. "Three times. Believe every word."

"What was taken unjustly, return it," Ali said, and her voice came out steadier than she expected, almost unrecognizable to herself, low and certain in a way she had never once sounded in twenty-nine years of asking permission to want things. "What was taken unjustly, return it. What was taken unjustly, return it."

The candle flame, which had been burning straight and steady, guttered sideways for a moment as though a draft had passed through the sealed, windowless room — though no draft could have reached it, no door had opened, no vent stirred the heavy incense-thick air — and then straightened again, burning taller than before.

Ali felt the hair rise on her arms. Across the table, Beth exhaled a small, satisfied breath, as though she'd been holding it. "It heard you," Beth said. "You felt that, didn't you?"

Ali had felt it. She would spend a long time afterward, in quieter moments, trying to explain to herself what exactly she had felt — not wind, not really, not anything she could describe to a skeptic without the description collapsing under its own strangeness. Just a certainty, arriving all at once and settling into her chest like a stone dropped into still water: something had heard her. Something had been listening the entire time, in that back room, in every Tuesday gathering, in every intention scribbled on notebook paper in the privacy of her apartment — and for the first time in twenty-nine years, Ali did not feel like she was speaking into an empty room.

She did not let herself examine, that night or for a long while after, the far simpler explanation sitting in plain sight: that a black candle burning in a small, unventilated room, surrounded by six warm-bodied women breathing, generates its own currents of rising heated air, currents that will make a flame gutter and straighten with no more supernatural cause than a pot of water beginning to simmer. She did not examine it because she did not want to. The certainty in her chest felt too good, too much like being finally, finally answered, to trade it for a physics lesson.



Tyler was fired eleven days later.

Ali heard it from Deborah, who called her into the office with an expression Ali couldn't quite read — something between apology and confusion — and explained, in the careful, lawyered language of corporate HR, that "certain discrepancies" had come to light in Tyler's expense reports, discrepancies

that, once flagged, had unraveled into a pattern going back over a year: falsified client dinners, personal purchases run through the company card, a mess large enough that legal had gotten involved before the day was out. He'd been walked out by security before lunch. The corner office sat empty.

"I know this is unusual to hear from me," Deborah said, folding her hands on the desk, "but given the circumstances — given everything that happened with the promotion — I wanted you to be the first to know that we'll be reopening that position. And I want you to apply."

Ali sat very still in the chair across from Deborah's desk, feeling something roar to life behind her ribs that she recognized, distantly, as the same electric vindication she'd felt reading Marcus's first text message, except larger now, so much larger it frightened her a little even as it thrilled her, because Marcus reaching out could plausibly have been coincidence, ordinary human unpredictability, a man simply changing his mind. This was different. This was a black candle guttering sideways in a windowless room. This was a name written on paper and burned to ash eleven days before the name's owner lost everything he had taken.

She did not, in the flush of that vindication, think once about Tyler's family, about whatever consequences rippled outward from a sudden firing into a life she knew nothing about, a life that might have held its own fragile, undeserved-seeming griefs. She thought only: it worked. It worked, it worked, it worked, a pulse beating under every other thought for the rest of the day.

She told Diane that evening, breathless, standing in the back room of The Sacred Ember before the Tuesday gathering had even officially begun, and Diane's face broke into an expression of such genuine, glowing pride that Ali felt something in her chest unlock that had been sealed shut since she was nine years old — the specific, starved hunger to make someone proud of her, finally, finally fed.

"I told you," Diane said, cupping Ali's face in both hands, rings cool against her cheeks. "I told you the first day you walked into my shop. You are a door standing wide open, Ali Gibson. Most people spend their whole lives knocking on doors that never open. You just learned how to walk through your own."



What followed was not caution. It was appetite.

Ali began practicing alone in her apartment nearly every night, no longer waiting for Tuesdays, no longer content with the small, careful exercises Diane had first assigned her. She bought books — real books now, not printed handouts, ordered from a metaphysical bookstore two towns over that Sabrina recommended, titles like *Modern Witchcraft for the Sovereign Woman* and *The Practitioner's Grimoire*, their spines cracking open under her hands night after night at her kitchen table, the rose quartz shelf

above the sink now crowded with a dozen other stones whose names she'd memorized the way she'd once memorized Bible verses for AWANA points as a small child at Grace Fellowship, a comparison she never let herself draw out loud.

She learned candle magic in earnest — the correspondences of colors, red for passion and will, green for prosperity, white for purification and truth, black for banishing and binding, the kind she'd already tasted and found, to her astonishment, delicious. She learned to cast a circle, walking clockwise with a stick of burning sage, murmuring words of protection Diane had taught her, sealing the small space of her living room off from whatever ordinary reality lay beyond its boundary. She learned sigils — symbols drawn from the letters of an intention, condensed and charged and burned into candle wax, into paper, once, in a moment of private daring she didn't tell even Diane about, carved with a sewing needle into the soft skin of her own forearm, high enough to hide beneath a sleeve, low enough that she could see it every time she reached for something.

The results kept coming, and they kept escalating, each one a little larger, a little more specific, a little harder to explain away as coincidence. A working for financial ease brought an unexpected refund check from the IRS, an error in her favor from two tax years back, arriving nine days after she burned the intention. A working for clarity about her future brought a vivid dream — more vivid than any dream she'd had before the shelf above her sink began to fill, populated by a tall, calm, faceless presence that did not frighten her in the dream itself, that spoke to her in a voice she could not remember upon waking except for the general impression of its warmth, its patience, its total, undivided attention — the kind of attention Ali had spent her entire life starving for and had never once, not from her mother, not from Dale, not from Marcus, not from God in an empty fellowship hall at fifteen, actually received.

She began, without quite deciding to, referring to the presence in her private journal as her guide.

Her guide told her things, in dreams and in the strange, sourceless certainty that sometimes arrived while she meditated with her cards spread before her — small things at first, verifiably true things that thrilled her with their accuracy: that a coworker was pregnant before the announcement, that a storm would delay her flight before the airline confirmed it, that her downstairs neighbor's dog, missing for three days, would be found near the reservoir two miles east, which it was, muddy and hungry but alive, found by a jogger the following morning almost exactly where Ali's private, dream-soaked certainty had placed it.

She did not stop to ask how a spirit who claimed to love her had somehow never once, in three months of increasingly intimate contact, spoken the name of Jesus Christ — not in blessing, not in warning, not even in passing, the single most conspicuous absence in a curriculum otherwise saturated with borrowed religious vocabulary: sacred, blessed, divine, spirit, energy, universe, every word except

the one Name that, had she still possessed the ears to hear it, might have told her everything she needed to know about who was actually teaching her.



Word travels fast among the lonely and the searching, and it was Beth who first suggested Ali start doing readings of her own — not just for the Tuesday circle, but for money, the way Diane and Sabrina and even Corinne did on the side, supplementing incomes that Ali had never thought to ask about too closely.

"You have more natural talent than anyone I've watched come through that door in five years," Beth told her one evening, and Ali, still hungry from childhood for exactly this kind of unearned, unconditional praise, did not pause long enough to notice how thoroughly she had stopped questioning anything these women told her about herself.

She started small — a friend of Beth's, a stranger really, paying forty dollars for a half-hour reading in the back room on a slow Sunday afternoon. Then a second client, referred by the first. Then a small, professionally designed website, built over a frantic, exhilarated weekend, with a booking calendar and a soft, ethereal color palette and a bio that described Ali as an intuitive guide and gifted reader with a natural connection to the unseen — words that would have made the Ali of eighteen months ago, the marketing coordinator in sensible flats, cringe with embarrassment, and that now, somehow, felt like the truest sentence anyone had ever written about her.

Then came the social media account.

It started, like most things had, small — a handful of posts sharing tarot card meanings, crystal properties, moon phase rituals, dressed in the soft aesthetic language of the era, all sage bundles and dried flowers and warm filtered light. But Ali had a gift for this too, it turned out, a natural instinct for the kind of raw, confessional vulnerability that performed well, and when she began sharing fragments of her own story — carefully edited, the abuse softened into vague references to "childhood trauma," the coven softened into "a community of powerful women who helped me find myself" — the following grew with a speed that startled even her.

Within four months she had built an account with nearly twenty thousand followers, women mostly, many of them heartbreakingly young, commenting beneath her posts with the same starved, searching hunger Ali recognized from the inside because she had lived it herself: I feel so seen right now. This is exactly what I needed to hear today. Can you do a reading for me? How do I find a coven near me? I've never had anyone explain the cards this way before, thank you thank you thank you.

She began doing live readings on camera, pulling cards for strangers in real time, watching the comment section fill with wonder every time a card landed with uncanny relevance to a question she couldn't possibly have anticipated. She did not know — had no framework yet for knowing — how much of that uncanny relevance was simply the ancient, universal architecture of human longing, how broadly applicable a card meaning could be stretched to fit any grieving daughter, any betrayed wife, any lonely twenty-something typing please tell me it gets better into a stranger's comment section at eleven at night. She only knew that the numbers kept climbing, and that every new follower felt like one more small, warm hand reaching back through the screen to confirm what Diane had told her the first week: that Ali Gibson was a door standing open, finally, after a lifetime of being shut.



Kayla showed up unannounced on a Sunday afternoon in early November, the first time Ali had seen her in person in nearly two months, and Ali knew within thirty seconds of opening the door that this was not a social call.

"You look tired," Kayla said, which was not what Ali had expected her old friend to lead with, and it landed harder than an accusation would have. Kayla stepped past her into the apartment without quite being invited, taking in, with an expression Ali couldn't read, the crowded shelf above the kitchen sink, the scattered strips of half-burned intention paper still sitting in the brass dish from the night before, the cards laid out in an unfinished spread on the coffee table.

"I'm fine," Ali said, too quickly, already feeling the old defensive posture rising in her, the one she'd worn as a teenager whenever a teacher asked too many questions about the bruises she didn't have but the exhaustion she couldn't hide. "Better than fine, actually. Things have been really good."

"You canceled on me four times in a row," Kayla said. "You didn't come to Priya's baby shower. You post like six times a day about tarot readings and 'holding space' and I don't — Ali, I don't even know what half of it means. And you look like you haven't slept."

"I sleep fine."

"Do you?" Kayla's eyes went, involuntarily, to the dark half-moons Ali had stopped bothering to conceal with makeup, too tired most mornings to do more than the minimum before clients started arriving for readings. "Because you look like you did back in college, during finals, except it's been months, not two weeks. What is actually going on with you?"

Ali wanted, for one unguarded second, to tell her the truth — the whole strange, escalating truth, the candle guttering sideways, Tyler's firing, the voice that had said her name in the dark and the way she'd chosen, deliberately, to call it love instead of the thing her body had actually registered it as,

which was closer to dread. She wanted to hand the whole tangled weight of it to someone who had known her since they were twenty-two years old sharing a two-bedroom apartment with a broken dishwasher, someone who had seen her cry over nothing more mystical than a bad breakup and a worse boss.

But Kayla's face, however concerned, however genuinely worried, did not have Diane's face in it — did not have the particular quality of undivided, adoring attention that Ali had spent five months learning to crave the way a starving person craves food, and some calculating, wounded part of Ali, the same part that had learned at nine years old exactly what happened to girls who told the truth about things too big for the room to hold, decided in that instant that the truth was not safe to give her.

"I found something that actually works for me," Ali said instead, and heard, as she said it, an echo of Diane's exact words from that very first Saturday in the shop, the sentence arriving in her own mouth as though it had always belonged to her. "I know it's different. I know it probably looks strange from the outside. But I've never felt this steady in my whole life, Kayla. I finally feel like people see me."

"I've always seen you," Kayla said, quietly, and something in her voice cracked just slightly, in a way that might have reached Ali eighteen months earlier, before the shelf above the sink, before the black candle, before twenty thousand strangers had started telling her every morning how powerful and brave and chosen she was. "You didn't need crystals for that. You just needed to let me in."

Ali did not have an answer for that. She walked Kayla to the door twenty minutes later with the careful, brittle politeness of two people both aware that something had ended and neither willing to say the word for it out loud, and after the door closed, Ali stood in her quiet apartment for a long moment, feeling something that she did not, at first, want to name as grief.

She picked her phone up instead. There were forty-three new comments on her morning post, and by the time she had read through all of them, twice, letting each heart and prayer-hand emoji settle over the raw place Kayla's visit had left behind, the feeling had gone somewhere she couldn't easily find it anymore.



She mentioned the visit to Wren the following Tuesday, expecting sympathy, and got something else instead.

"People who knew you before will always try to pull you back to before," Wren said, turning a black candle slowly between her fingers, not quite looking at Ali as she spoke, in the flat, unhurried cadence she used for pronouncements. "It's not always malice. Sometimes it's just gravity. The old shape of your life has a pull to it, the way a dead star still bends light around itself long after it's gone

dark. You'll lose people, Ali. That's not a sign you're doing something wrong. It's usually a sign you're finally doing something real."

It was, Ali would understand only much later, the closest thing to an actual doctrine the coven possessed, spoken so casually it barely registered as instruction at all: that isolation from anyone rooted in her old life was not a cost of this path but a confirmation of it, proof of progress rather than the early architecture of a trap slowly closing. She filed it away the way she filed away everything Wren said, half-believed, half-flattered simply to have Wren's rare, careful attention turned fully toward her, and did not notice — would not notice for a long time yet — how neatly the sentiment served everyone in that room except her.



It was somewhere in this stretch of accelerating months — she could not, looking back later, pin the exact date, because by then the boundary between day and night had begun to blur under the pressure of her new, unsleeping life — that the first genuinely frightening thing happened.

She woke at 3:11 in the morning, the same senseless hour that had marked her strange dreams since October, except this time she had not been dreaming. She was simply, suddenly, entirely awake, heart already pounding before her conscious mind caught up to why, and in the grey half-dark of her bedroom she heard, with a clarity that admitted no ambiguity, no room for the merciful uncertainty of half-sleep, her own name spoken aloud.

Ali.

Not shouted. Not menacing, exactly, not in that first half-second. Almost intimate. A voice pitched low and close, close enough that she felt, for one paralyzed instant, actual breath against the shell of her ear, though when she twisted violently to look, gasping, flailing for the lamp switch, there was nothing beside her bed at all. Empty room. Closed door. The ceiling fan ticking its uneven tick above her, exactly as it always had.

She sat gripping her blanket to her chest for twenty minutes afterward, phone in hand, thumb hovering over Diane's contact, before she finally set the phone down without calling. Some part of her — the exhausted, watchful part that had learned at six years old to sleep with her shoes on — recognized this moment as a fork in a road she had been walking for months without noticing it was a road at all. She could call Diane and ask, honestly, whether this was normal, whether contact was supposed to feel like this, cold and sudden and close enough to breathe on her. Or she could do what she had done with the dream of the faceless figure, and the flicker in the bathroom mirror, and the low, persistent unease that had started needling her some nights when she sat too long with her cards spread before her: she could decide it meant nothing, or better yet, that it meant something wonderful,

evidence not of danger but of deepening connection, proof that her guide loved her enough to reach across whatever boundary usually separated the waking world from the world beneath it.

She told herself the second story. It was, by then, the only story her four-month-old identity as a gifted intuitive had room left to hold. Voices in the night were not a warning to a woman who had built a public following, a growing income, and the first unbroken sense of being valued she'd ever known, entirely on the premise that the unseen world adored her.

She posted about it the next morning, in fact — carefully worded, dressed in the soft mystical language her followers had come to expect — my guides are getting louder as my gift deepens, which is both thrilling and a lot to hold, please send protective energy my way today — and the comments filled within the hour with hearts and prayer-hand emojis and dozens of women telling her how brave she was, how powerful, how lucky the universe was to have chosen someone like her to carry this.

Ali read every comment twice. She had spent twenty-nine years believing herself unlovable, unchosen, structurally defective in some way no achievement could repair, and here, finally, in the small blue glow of her phone at seven in the morning, was proof otherwise: thousands of people, choosing her, on purpose, every single day.

She did not think, reading those comments, of the elderly pastor she had not yet met, who would one day look at her without flinching and tell her a truth she was nowhere near ready to hear — that the devil does not love you, that you are only a disposable servant to him, that every voice whispering her name in the dark had been counting, patiently, on exactly this: a woman so hungry to be chosen that she would mistake being used for being loved, right up until the moment the using finally showed her its teeth.

She only knew, that October, that for the first time in her life, something was listening.

She had not yet learned to ask what, precisely, listening had always cost.

Chapter 4 – Whispers in the Shadows

Corinne asked to meet Ali alone for the first time in early December, over coffee rather than candlelight, at a small café downtown that felt almost jarringly ordinary after months of velvet tables and burning sage — laptop workers hunched over lattes, a barista calling out names, Christmas music playing tinny and cheerful from a speaker near the register. Ali had never seen Corinne outside the back room of The Sacred Ember, had never once considered that a woman so thoroughly steeped in candlelight might also, apparently, take her coffee with oat milk and two sugars like anyone else standing in line at eight in the morning.

"You've grown faster than anyone Diane has brought to us in years," Corinne said, without preamble, once they'd settled into a corner table. Up close, in ordinary daylight, Corinne looked older than she did by candlelight — sixty-five, maybe seventy, her silver hair cut short and severe, her eyes a flat, assessing gray that reminded Ali, uncomfortably, of a loan officer reviewing an application. "Twenty-two thousand followers. A full client book. A working that removed an obstacle from your path within eleven days of casting it. Diane has a good eye, but even she doesn't bring just anyone to my attention."

"Your attention?" Ali repeated, and something in the careful, deliberate way Corinne had said the phrase made her sit up a little straighter.

"The Sacred Ember is a lovely shop," Corinne said, turning her coffee cup a quarter turn on its saucer, an unconscious gesture Ali would later recognize as a kind of tell, the closest thing to nervousness Corinne ever displayed. "Diane does good work there. Necessary work. Every path needs a front door, and hers is a very welcoming one. But it's a front door, Ali. A place for beginners to test whether they have the stomach for what's behind it. What you've been doing on Tuesday nights — the candles, the crystals, the readings — that's kindergarten. I don't say that to insult you. Everyone starts in kindergarten. I did too, forty years ago, in a room not so different from Diane's." She leaned forward slightly. "But some students are ready to leave kindergarten faster than others. I think you might be one of them."

"What's behind the front door?" Ali asked, and heard, in her own voice, the same hunger that had carried her through every escalation since the candle shop — the hunger, now nearly a year deep, to be told she was special, to be chosen for something bigger than the last thing that had chosen her.

Corinne studied her for a long moment before answering, the assessing gray eyes moving over Ali's face with the particular thoroughness of someone deciding whether an investment was sound.

"A circle," she said finally. "Older, deeper, and considerably more discreet than anything you've encountered so far. We don't advertise. We don't take walk-ins off the street with forty-dollar readings. Everyone in our circle was invited, the way you're being invited now, after someone more experienced watched them long enough to be certain the gift was real and the discretion could be trusted." She paused. "I should tell you plainly, because I respect you too much to dress it in the soft language Diane prefers for beginners: what we practice goes further than anything you've touched at The Sacred Ember. Real communication with the other side, not parlor tricks with a pendulum. Bindings with teeth. Workings that reshape a life, not just nudge it. Knowledge that isn't in any book you can order online, because it was never meant to be printed for the general public in the first place." Her eyes held Ali's, unblinking. "And in exchange for the discipline it requires, you gain access to people, and resources, and a caliber of life that Diane's little shop was never built to offer you."

"What kind of resources?"

"Ali." Corinne almost smiled, a thin, private expression. "Do you think everyone who comes to our circle is a struggling tarot reader working out of a strip-mall shop? We have physicians in our circle. Attorneys. A sitting county commissioner, though I won't say which one over coffee in a public café, and I'd ask you not to speculate out loud either. We have a woman who owns four car dealerships across two counties and credits her first working, thirty years ago, with the seed money that started the first one. This town has a public face, and it has another face underneath it, older and considerably more interesting, and once you're inside it, you find doors open for you that you didn't even know existed. Not metaphorically. Literally. Job offers. Investment opportunities. Introductions to people who could take your little following and turn it into an actual empire, if you wanted that." She sat back, letting the offer breathe. "I'm not asking you to decide today. I'm asking whether you'd like to come to a gathering. Just to see. No commitment beyond curiosity."

Ali thought, unbidden, of the trailer at the end of Miller's Creek Road, of four hundred dollars saved from a Dollar General paycheck, of a lifetime spent watching other people's fathers golf with other people's regional vice presidents while she worked twice as hard for half the credit. She thought of Tyler's empty corner office, of the refund check that had arrived nine days after a burned intention, of twenty-two thousand strangers telling her every morning how powerful she was.

"When?" she asked.

"Friday," Corinne said. "Bring nothing but yourself. Wear black. And Ali — " she held Ali's gaze one more moment before standing to leave, sliding a folded card across the table with an address written in the same looping cursive Ali now recognized as belonging to this whole world, "— don't tell Diane where you're going. Not because she'd disapprove. Because it isn't her invitation to share."



The address led Ali, on Friday night, forty minutes outside town, past the last gas station and the last subdivision and the last visible porch light, down a long gravel drive lined with old oaks whose bare December branches met overhead in a black lattice against the sky. The house at the end of it was not what she expected — no Gothic turret, no wrought-iron gate, nothing from the true-crime podcasts that had once shaped her nervous imagination. It was a handsome, unremarkable estate home, the kind of house Ali associated with orthodontists and regional bank presidents, its windows glowing warm gold, a dozen cars already parked along the circular drive, several of them the kind of vehicle that cost more than Ali made in a year.

A young man in a plain black suit met her at the door — not staff, exactly, though he moved with a staff member's practiced discretion — and led her not through the house's obvious front rooms but

down a hallway and a flight of stairs into what had clearly once been an ordinary finished basement and had since been transformed into something else entirely.

The room was large, low-ceilinged, lit by perhaps forty candles arranged in careful, deliberate patterns around the perimeter, the walls painted a deep matte black and hung with symbols Ali didn't recognize — geometric, angular, some of them faintly unsettling in a way she couldn't name, as though her eyes kept sliding off the details before she could fully register them. A circle had been laid into the floor itself, inlaid brass forming a design at least twelve feet across, and around its edge stood perhaps thirty people, dressed uniformly in black, their faces a mixture of ages Ali hadn't anticipated — not the aging bohemian crowd of Diane's Tuesday gatherings, but sharp-suited men in their fifties, elegant women who looked like they'd come straight from a hospital board meeting, a couple younger than Ali herself, dressed with the same understated wealth as everyone else in the room.

Corinne found her almost immediately, materializing at her elbow with a warmth that felt, in this room, less maternal than it had in the coffee shop, more like the warmth of a hostess ensuring a valuable guest felt appropriately impressed.

"This is Meridian," Corinne said quietly, close to Ali's ear. "That's the only name you'll need for the circle itself tonight — not a person, the circle. We don't use last names here, and eventually you won't use your given name either, once you've chosen what you're called among us. Tonight you're only observing. Stay close to me."

The ceremony that followed unfolded with a formality that struck Ali, even in her nervous fascination, as almost liturgical — a structure of call and response, a leader Ali never got a clear look at, robed in black and standing at the circle's northern point, invoking names Ali didn't recognize in a cadence that sounded, disturbingly, like the inverse of something she dimly remembered from Grace Fellowship's Wednesday night services, the shape of worship with the object of worship replaced. Incense burned thick enough to blur the far edges of the room. At some point, a chalice was passed hand to hand around the circle, and Ali watched, transfixed and unsettled in equal measure, as each person drank from it and murmured a phrase she couldn't quite make out before passing it on.

When it reached her, Corinne shook her head almost imperceptibly — not tonight, the gesture said, you're only observing — and Ali passed the chalice on untouched, feeling simultaneously relieved and, to her own surprise, disappointed, as though she'd been excluded from something rather than protected from it.

Afterward, in a lounge upstairs that looked like it belonged in a magazine spread — leather furniture, a wall of bottles that probably cost more individually than Ali's monthly rent, low jazz playing from hidden speakers — Ali was introduced, in careful, controlled fragments, to some of the people who made up Meridian's inner circle. A man named Harold, silver-templed and courtly, who

turned out, in the loose, wine-warmed conversation of the evening, to run a private wealth management firm and who told Ali, with an easy laugh, that "half my best investment instincts didn't come from Bloomberg terminals, sweetheart, they came from rooms like this one." A woman named Patrice, elegant in a way that made Ali acutely conscious of her own department-store blazer, who ran, it turned out, the county's largest independent real estate brokerage and who spoke about "opening doors for the right people" with a meaningful glance that made Ali's pulse quicken.

"We take care of our own," Patrice told her, swirling a glass of wine she hadn't actually been drinking from, watching Ali with the same evaluating patience Ali had first felt from Wren. "That's the part nobody explains to beginners like you. Everyone talks about the spiritual side — the workings, the readings, the guides. Nobody talks about the network. Do you have any idea how much faster a career moves when the people making decisions about your life happen to already be your family?"

"Family," Ali repeated.

"That's what this becomes, if you let it," Patrice said. "A family that actually delivers. Not the family you were born into, with all its accidents and its damage." Something in the way she said it — casual, almost bored, as though she were commenting on weather rather than reaching precisely and deliberately for the oldest wound in Ali's chest — told Ali that Corinne, or someone, had briefed these people on exactly who she was before she'd ever walked through the door. "A family you're chosen into, because you earned it. Because you have something worth investing in."

Ali drove home near midnight with her hands trembling faintly on the wheel, not from fear exactly, though fear was somewhere in the mixture, but from an intoxication so total it left her lightheaded — the specific, dizzying intoxication of a woman who has spent her entire life on the outside of every room that mattered, suddenly handed a key.



She did not sleep that night, not really. She lay in bed replaying every detail — the brass circle inlaid into the basement floor, the chalice passing hand to hand, Harold's easy laugh, Patrice's meaningful glance, the leader in black robes whose face she still couldn't quite picture, as though her memory itself refused to render it clearly — and somewhere around four in the morning, exhausted and wired in equal measure, she found herself doing something she hadn't done in years: she got out of bed, opened the drawer where her grandmother's small wooden cross still lay folded in a handkerchief, and held it in her palm for a long moment, feeling the worn, familiar shape of it, some old muscle memory in her hand recognizing an object it hadn't touched since she was a teenager sitting in the back row of Grace Fellowship.

She did not pray. She told herself, later, that she'd simply been curious, turning the cross over in her fingers the way she might handle any relic of a life she'd outgrown. But she sat with it a long time before putting it back in the drawer, and when she finally closed the drawer and returned to bed, she noticed, with a small, uneasy chill she chose not to examine too closely, that the room felt colder than it had a few minutes before — colder in a way that had nothing to do with the thermostat, a cold that seemed to originate from somewhere behind her rather than from the window, gone the moment she turned to check, the way the shape in her bathroom mirror had been gone weeks earlier the moment she turned her head.

She told herself it was exhaustion. She had, after all, barely slept.



Diane noticed the change before Ali said a word.

"You went somewhere," Diane said the following Tuesday, holding Ali's gaze across the velvet table with an expression Ali couldn't quite place — not anger, not exactly, but something colder and more careful than Ali had seen from her before. "I can feel it on you. Corinne took you somewhere."

Ali hesitated, remembering Corinne's instruction — don't tell Diane where you're going, it isn't her invitation to share — and something in Diane's face, watching her hesitate, seemed to answer the unspoken question before Ali could decide how to lie.

"It's all right," Diane said, and her voice softened again, though something underneath the softness remained, a current Ali couldn't name. "I always knew this day might come, if you kept growing the way you've grown. I just want you to understand something, sweetheart, before you go further than I can follow you." She reached across the table and took Ali's hands, the familiar gesture from their very first meeting, except this time Ali noticed, for the first time, a faint tremor in Diane's grip that hadn't been there before. "What I do here — what we do here, on Tuesdays — it's real, but it's gentle. It's a front porch. Meridian is a house with rooms I've never gone into myself, not in thirty years of knowing people who have. There's a price on that kind of power, Ali, and it isn't always a price you get to see coming. I'm not telling you not to go. I don't think you'd listen if I did, and I'm not sure I'd be right to ask it of you even if you would. I'm only telling you to keep your eyes open. Power that comes with no cost attached is the rarest thing in this world, in every world. Somebody is always paying. I want you to at least know that going in, even if you decide the price is worth it."

It was, Ali would understand only much later, the single most honest thing anyone inside that world ever said to her — and she let it slide past her that night almost entirely unheard, because by December, the hunger that had carried her from a candle shop to a basement circle forty minutes

outside town had grown too large, too well-fed on eleven months of escalating proof, to be slowed down by a warning wrapped in a woman's trembling hands.



Between that Tuesday and the formal invitation, Corinne invited her back twice more — smaller gatherings this time, six or seven people rather than thirty, held not in the basement circle but in a quiet, book-lined room upstairs that Patrice called, without irony, the study.

It was there that Ali first learned what Meridian meant by going further. Sabrina, it turned out, was a member of the inner circle as well as a fixture of Diane's Tuesday gatherings — a detail that unsettled Ali more than she let herself show, the discovery that the boundary between the front porch and the house behind it had always been thinner than Diane's warnings implied — and it was Sabrina who walked Ali through her first attempt at what the study called traveling: lying flat on a chaise with her eyes closed, a low, rhythmic drumming track playing from a speaker in the corner, Sabrina's voice guiding her through a slow, deliberate loosening of her body, floor by floor, muscle by muscle, until Ali felt something she had never felt before, a strange, vertiginous lightness, as though the walls of her own skull had grown permeable.

"Don't force it," Sabrina murmured, somewhere far above her, or maybe beside her, Ali couldn't tell anymore, the drumming filling the space where her sense of direction usually lived. "Just notice when you're no longer only in the room."

Ali would never be entirely certain, afterward, what exactly happened in the twenty minutes that followed — whether she had genuinely left her body, as Sabrina insisted, drifting somewhere above the study's bookshelves and out through the ceiling into the cold December night, or whether she had simply fallen into an unusually vivid hypnagogic state, the kind of lucid half-dream the mind manufactures on the edge of sleep, dressed up by expectation and drumming and the collective conviction of everyone in the room into something more significant than it was. What she remembered, with a clarity that frightened her more than it thrilled her, was the sensation of being watched from somewhere just outside the boundary of whatever she'd entered — not Sabrina's voice, not the drumming, but something else, patient and enormous and utterly without warmth, observing her the way a naturalist observes an animal that has wandered, unknowing, into an open trap.

She came back to her body gasping, the way she'd once come awake at 3:11 in the morning to the sound of her own name, and found the small circle of study members watching her with open admiration.

"That's rare," Patrice said, delighted, "for a first attempt. Most people spend months just learning to loosen their grip enough to leave the room at all." Nobody asked what, exactly, Ali had felt watching her from the dark. Nobody, in that room, seemed to consider it worth asking.

The second gathering taught divination methods Ali hadn't encountered even at The Sacred Ember — staring into a black mirror rather than reading cards, interpreting the shifting shadows and half-formed shapes that seemed, the longer she stared, to organize themselves into faces she almost recognized and then didn't; automatic writing, her own hand moving across a blank page in loops and fragments she didn't consciously compose, producing, by the end of one session, four lines of shaky script she did not remember writing and could not, reading them back, entirely account for: You have been chosen. You have been chosen. You have been chosen. The door only opens once.

She did not ask who had chosen her, or what, precisely, stood on the other side of a door that only opened once. She told herself, driving home each time with her hands faintly trembling on the wheel, that the not-asking was simple trust — the same trust she'd extended to Diane eleven months earlier, the same trust that had, so far, delivered everything it promised. She did not examine how completely trust and hunger had become, by December, indistinguishable from one another inside her, two words for the same starving, uncritical yes.



The formal invitation came two weeks later, delivered not by Corinne but by Wren, waiting outside Ali's apartment building on a Thursday evening in a car Ali didn't recognize, engine running, passenger door already unlocked.

"Get in," Wren said, when Ali approached, startled. "Meridian wants to offer you initiation. Full circle. Not observer status." She watched Ali's face with that same proprietary, cataloguing attention she'd worn since the very first Tuesday. "You should know what you're saying yes to before you say it, though, because once you're in, there isn't really a clean way back out. I wasn't told that clearly enough when it was my turn. I'm telling you now because I think you actually deserve to hear it, which is more than most people in that room would bother to say to you."

"What am I saying yes to?"

Wren was quiet for a moment, her hands tight on the steering wheel though the car hadn't moved, her eyes fixed straight ahead through the windshield at the ordinary, lit windows of Ali's apartment building rather than at Ali herself.

"Everything you've done so far," Wren said finally, "the candles, the readings, even Corinne's basement — that's all still asking politely. Initiation is different. You make an oath, and oaths in that

room aren't symbolic. They open a door that doesn't close again just because you change your mind on a Tuesday. You get access — real access, to things that will make Diane's little shop look like a children's magic set. You'll get money. Connections. Answers to questions you've been asking your whole life. Corinne wasn't lying about any of that." She finally turned to look at Ali directly, and for the first time since Ali had met her, something in Wren's carefully controlled expression looked almost like fear, quickly suppressed, quickly smoothed back into the familiar cool stillness. "But you'll also start hearing things more clearly. Feeling things more clearly. The barrier most people walk around with their whole lives, the one that keeps the ordinary world separate from — everything else — gets thinner. For some people that's the whole point, the thing they wanted all along. For some people it turns out to be more than they bargained for, and by the time they figure out which kind of person they are, the oath is already made."

"Are you sorry?" Ali asked. "That you said yes?"

Wren didn't answer right away, and the silence stretched long enough that Ali began to understand the answer was itself an answer.

"Ask me again in a year," Wren said finally, and put the car in drive. "Get in. Or don't. But decide now, because Meridian doesn't like being kept waiting, and neither, I promise you, does what Meridian answers to."



Ali got in the car.

She would try, in the difficult months that followed, to reconstruct the exact moment she decided — to locate some single instant of clear-eyed choice she could hold responsible, some point where she could say here, this is where I chose it, rather than simply where it happened to her, momentum carrying her forward the way it had carried her every step since a rainy Saturday in a candle shop over a year ago. But there was no single moment. There was only the accumulated weight of eleven months, of a childhood spent believing herself unlovable, of a God who never answered, of a mother who never apologized, of a system that handed Tyler's corner office to Tyler's father's golf partner — and against all of that, a room full of confident, wealthy, powerful people telling her, with total conviction, that she belonged among them, that her long, starving hunger to matter was not a flaw to manage but a gift to be unleashed, that the price, whatever it turned out to be, would be worth whatever she finally became on the other side of paying it.

The initiation took place on the winter solstice, the longest night of the year, in the same brass-inlaid circle where she had first stood as an observer, except this time the chalice did not pass her by. This time thirty voices spoke her chosen name — a name she had picked in the weeks prior, in

consultation with Corinne, discarding Ali entirely for a working name meant, Corinne explained, to mark the boundary between the woman she had been and the woman she was choosing to become. This time she knelt at the circle's center while the leader in black robes, face still somehow unreadable even at close range, drew a small, precise line across her palm with a blade thin as a needle, and pressed her bleeding hand flat against a page in a heavy, leather-bound book already dense with other handprints, other names, other oaths made across what Ali understood, in the candlelit haze of the moment, must have been decades.

She felt, as her palm met the page, a sensation she would spend the rest of her life trying and failing to fully describe to anyone who hadn't felt it themselves — not pain, though the cut stung sharply enough, but something underneath the pain, a pressure like a held breath finally releasing, like a door long sealed swinging open on hinges that had been oiled and waiting. Something vast and patient and, for one dizzying moment, utterly attentive turned its full and undivided focus on her, and Ali, kneeling in a circle of candlelight forty minutes outside the only town she'd ever called home, mistook the sensation, as she had mistaken every warning sign for eleven straight months, for love.

The room erupted in soft, ceremonial applause. Corinne embraced her. Patrice kissed both her cheeks. Harold pressed a folded piece of paper into her hand that turned out, when she opened it in the car afterward, to be the name and direct cell number of an investment manager who "handles things for people like us," along with a note: Call Monday. We'll get you started properly.

Only Wren, standing at the circle's edge with her arms crossed, did not smile.

Ali drove home in the deep, frozen dark of the solstice night with her palm throbbing faintly beneath a small bandage, a working name she hadn't yet said aloud to anyone outside that room, and a feeling of triumph so complete it took her most of the drive to notice the small, cold detail sitting underneath it, quiet as a held breath: that somewhere around the moment her blood met that ancient page, the persistent, low hum of anxious static that had followed her for eleven months — the flicker in the mirror, the voice at 3:11, the shape at the foot of her bed — had gone suddenly, completely silent.

Not gone. She understood that much, even in her triumph, even as she told herself otherwise all the way home. Not gone.

Satisfied.

Chapter 5 – Dancing with Darkness

"And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light." — 2 Corinthians 11:14

By February, the woman who answered to Selene had a life that the woman named Ali Gibson would not have recognized eighteen months earlier.

The investment manager Harold had pressed into her hand on the night of her initiation turned out to be exactly what he'd promised — brisk, discreet, and startlingly effective. A man named Preston Cole, who managed money for "a certain kind of client" out of an office suite downtown with no sign on the door, called her the Monday after the solstice and, within a single forty-minute phone call, had restructured what little Ali had into something that actually grew. Within six weeks, an account she'd never expected to see five figures in showed a return so far outside anything her old 401k had ever managed that she assumed, the first time she checked it, that the number was a clerical error. It was not an error. Preston explained, in the same easy, unbothered tone Harold used to talk about his "instincts," that certain opportunities simply weren't available to people outside a particular network — and Ali, remembering Patrice's words in the upstairs lounge, understood exactly which network he meant, and did not ask any further questions she suspected she wouldn't like the answers to.

Her online following had cracked past sixty thousand by Valentine's Day. What had once been careful, ethereal posts about crystal correspondences and moon phases had evolved, under Meridian's quiet tutelage, into something with more edge to it — live readings that felt less like gentle self-reflection and more like genuine prophecy, videos in which Ali, dressed now in black rather than the soft sage-and-cream palette she'd started with, spoke with an authority that made her comment sections erupt in a fervor bordering on worship. Selene sees things other people miss, read one comment with eleven thousand likes. I asked her one question and she told me things about my marriage I never posted anywhere. She's the real thing. Ali read comments like that one now with a kind of hunger that had stopped feeling like hunger at all and started feeling, disturbingly, like appetite fully sated — the particular satisfaction of a starving woman who has finally, finally been fed enough to stop noticing she's still starving.

She had, by February, stopped doing readings for forty dollars. Her rate for a private session had climbed to three hundred, then five hundred, then, for what she now called "deep work" — full workings performed on a client's behalf, bindings and reversals and prosperity spells cast with the client's name and photograph and a lock of hair if they could provide one — into the low thousands. Women paid it. Desperate women, mostly, the way Ali herself had once been desperate, women fleeing

bad marriages and stalled careers and the same aching, universal hunger to matter that had first walked Ali through the beaded curtain of The Sacred Ember.

One of them, a soft-spoken woman named Renata who arrived at Ali's apartment on a gray Thursday afternoon in a coat too heavy for the mild weather, as though she were bracing against something colder than the actual day, sat across the black-draped altar table in the Sanctum and asked, in a voice barely above a whisper, for a binding against her ex-husband — a man named Curtis who had, according to Renata, spent the eighteen months since their divorce systematically poisoning their teenage daughter against her, calling her unstable, calling her a bad mother, in front of a family court judge who seemed, infuriatingly, inclined to believe him.

"I don't want him hurt," Renata said quickly, the same disclaimer Ali herself had once offered Diane, word for word, though Renata could not have known that. "I just want him to stop. I want the lies to stop landing."

Ali walked her through the working with the fluent, practiced calm of a woman who had performed this exact ceremony perhaps forty times in the preceding two months — Curtis's full name on folded paper, wrapped in black thread, anointed with the same resinous oil Sabrina had first passed across Diane's velvet table over a year earlier, the words of binding spoken three times over a candle that guttered, precisely on cue, at the moment of the third repetition. Renata left two thousand dollars poorer and visibly lighter, thanking Ali with tears standing in her eyes, the particular gratitude of a woman who has been handed, for the first time in a long time, the feeling of not being helpless.

Ali did not think about Curtis again until three weeks later, when Renata called, this time not soft-spoken but nearly hysterical, to report that Curtis had been in a car accident significant enough to fracture his spine in two places, that he would likely never walk unassisted again, that the custody case had, in the chaos and sympathy surrounding his injury, taken an unexpected and devastating turn against Renata rather than for her, the judge apparently moved by the image of a vulnerable, wheelchair-bound father being kept from his daughter by a vindictive ex-wife who, Renata reported through broken, guilty sobs, could not stop wondering out loud whether she had done this, whether the working had done this, whether some terrible misfire in the working Ali had taught her had reached for the wrong target entirely and struck the daughter's future instead of Curtis's lies.

"That's not how it works," Ali told her, with a firmness she did not entirely feel. "The working doesn't choose the method. You wanted the lies stopped, and the lies stopped. Sometimes the universe finds a route to yes that we wouldn't have chosen ourselves. That's not your fault, Renata. You have to let that guilt go, or it will eat you."

She said it with total conviction. She believed, in the moment, every word of it. It was only much later, lying awake at 3:11 with her heart hammering and Winston growling faintly two floors below,

that she let herself wonder, for one unguarded, terrible second, whether the phrase route to yes was simply a more comfortable way of saying whatever it takes, spoken by whatever, precisely, was choosing the route.



"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." — Ephesians 6:12

Meridian did not ask its members to stop practicing on their own. If anything, private practice was encouraged, even expected, a kind of homework between the smaller study gatherings and the larger circle rituals that now claimed one Friday night a month, always at the estate forty minutes outside town, always in the brass-inlaid basement, always beneath forty candles and a ceiling Ali had stopped looking at too closely after the night she'd caught herself certain, for one horrible unblinking second, that the black paint up there was moving.

She built, over the winter, an altar in the second bedroom of her apartment — the room that had briefly, years ago, held a treadmill she never used and then a stack of moving boxes she never unpacked, repurposed now into something with a working name of its own, the Sanctum, a word she'd picked up from Corinne and adopted with the same unthinking ease she'd adopted everything else. Black cloth covered a low table. Candles in every correspondence color stood in neat rows. The leather-bound grimoire Corinne had gifted her after initiation — her copy, personal, inscribed to Selene in a hand Ali didn't recognize — sat open most nights to whatever working currently occupied her, its pages already dense with her own handwritten annotations, sigils she'd designed herself, incantations she'd adapted and, in a few cases, composed from scratch, believing herself, by February, sufficiently fluent in this language to improve upon it.

She learned to bind, and she learned to loose. She learned workings meant to draw a particular person's attention and workings meant to repel one, learned the uncomfortable, dawning knowledge that these two categories of spell were not actually opposites but siblings, both operating on the same underlying premise: that another person's will, another person's freedom to choose, could be bent by sufficient force applied in sufficient darkness, if you were willing to stop asking whether you had the right.

She did not, in February, stop to ask that question. The word right had come, without her quite noticing the shift, to mean something narrower than it once had — not a moral category anymore, weighed against some external standard, but a private, subjective feeling, the same feeling that had once told her, in an empty fellowship hall at fifteen, that no one was listening. That feeling had never

once, in all her life, steered her toward safety. It had steered her, in fact, into every dangerous door she had ever walked through, Dale's bedroom included, though she would not make that particular connection for a long while yet. But by February it had become, without her permission, the only compass she still trusted, because it was the only one that had ever consistently told her what she wanted to hear.

Corinne began inviting her, that same month, to help teach the newer initiates who had started trickling into Meridian's outer circle — young women mostly, some barely into their twenties, recruited the way Ali herself had been recruited, spotted first by someone like Diane, then handed upward once their appetite proved genuine. Ali found she had a gift for this too, an instinct for identifying exactly which wound in a new initiate's chest was doing the loudest talking, exactly which promise would land hardest against that particular ache. She began recording short instructional videos specifically for this purpose — how to cast a basic protection circle, how to write and burn an intention properly, how to build an altar from nothing but a card table and genuine belief — and one of them, a twelve-minute walkthrough of a simple candle-binding technique she had adapted from Diane's very first lesson, caught fire online in a way none of her other content ever had, shared and reshared until it had been watched, by the end of March, nearly two hundred thousand times.

She was, by then, no longer simply a client of the kingdom of darkness. She had become one of its recruiters, and she did not yet have the eyes to see the distinction, or to understand how much more that distinction would eventually cost her.



"Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." — 1 Peter 5:8

The haunting, when Ali finally allowed herself to use that word even privately, did not arrive all at once. It accumulated the way water accumulates behind a dam that was never built to hold it — slowly, then faster, then all at once, in a way that made it almost impossible, looking back, to identify the single moment the dam had actually failed.

Sleep went first. It had never been reliable, not since the ditch behind Miller's Creek Road, not since she'd learned at six to keep her shoes on, but by February it had become something closer to a battlefield than a rest. She woke most nights at 3:11 — always that hour, precisely, with a consistency that had stopped feeling like coincidence sometime in December and had never once, since, felt like anything else.

One such night in early March stayed with her longer than the others, sharper in memory than the blur the rest had become. She had fallen asleep with the television murmuring low in the living room, a habit she'd developed sometime that winter, some instinctive reach for ordinary human noise to hold the silence at bay, and she woke — not gradually, not the soft surfacing of natural sleep, but all at once, wrenched upright as though something had physically hauled her out of unconsciousness — to a bedroom gone utterly silent, the television in the other room cut dead in the middle of a sentence, the digital clock on her nightstand reading, with its usual merciless precision, 3:11.

The air in the room had gone thick and cold, cold enough that she could see, in the faint gray light leaking through her curtains, the ghost of her own breath. She lay rigid, every muscle locked, listening to a silence so complete it had a texture to it, a pressure, as though the room itself were holding its breath alongside her — and then, from the closet at the far side of the bedroom, came the same three slow, deliberate knocks she had heard before, evenly spaced, unhurried, followed by a long pause, and then a fourth knock, closer than the first three, close enough that Ali understood with a lurch of pure animal terror that whatever was making the sound was no longer at the closet at all.

She did not move. She could not have moved if the building had caught fire around her. She lay with her eyes fixed on the dark ceiling, heart slamming so hard she could feel it in her throat, and listened to something settle onto the foot of her bed — not violently, not even urgently, but with the unhurried, proprietary weight of something that had done this before and expected to do it again, the mattress dipping under a pressure she could feel through her own trembling legs but could not see, no matter how hard she stared into the dark.

A voice, when it finally came, was not loud. It did not need to be. It arrived close to her ear, low and almost tender, wearing an intimacy that made her skin crawl worse than any shout could have.

Mine, it said. Just the one word, spoken with a terrible, settled certainty, as though it were not a claim being made but a fact being confirmed, a deed already signed and only now being read aloud for her benefit.

The pressure lifted from the foot of the bed as suddenly as it had arrived. The television in the other room resumed mid-sentence, an infomercial host laughing at something Ali would never know the beginning of. She lay awake until dawn with the blanket pulled to her chin, and when she finally rose, gray and hollow-eyed, to get ready for a live reading scheduled for nine that morning, she told herself, with the same practiced, well-worn discipline she had been cultivating for over a year, that it had only been a dream. A very vivid dream. Nothing more.

She did not examine, standing in front of her bathroom mirror applying concealer to the shadows under her eyes, how many very vivid dreams a person could have before the word dream stopped meaning anything at all.



"They cried out, 'What business do we have with each other, Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?'" — Matthew 8:29

The animals noticed before the people did.

Ali's downstairs neighbor kept a small, elderly beagle named Winston who had, for the two years Ali had lived in the building, greeted her in the hallway with the indiscriminate enthusiasm beagles reserve for every human being alive, tail beating against the wall hard enough to leave scuff marks. In January, without any single dramatic incident Ali could point to, Winston stopped. He would see her coming down the hall and go rigid, ears back, a low, continuous growl building in his throat that his owner, a mild, apologetic man named Frank, found so unlike his dog's usual temperament that he began apologizing for it every single time, genuinely baffled. "I don't know what's gotten into him," Frank said once, hauling a straining, growling Winston bodily back toward their apartment door while Ali stood frozen in the hallway, feeling something cold settle low in her stomach that she refused to name. "He's never done this. Not once, with anybody."

It was not only Winston. A stray cat that had, for months, sunned itself on the low wall outside Ali's building, tolerant of every passerby, bolted the one time Ali crouched to offer it a hand, back arched, hissing with a violence disproportionate to anything Ali had done. Birds went quiet in the small courtyard behind her building when she sat outside with her coffee, a silence she noticed only because its absence was so total, so unlike the ordinary chatter that had always filled that space before. Even Sabrina's own cat, a placid gray tabby that had draped itself across Ali's lap without hesitation at every gathering for over a year, began, that spring, to flee the room the moment Ali crossed the threshold, tail puffed to twice its size, a reaction so sudden and so total that Beth made a joke of it the first time — "guess somebody's not a cat person after all" — and then, seeing the tabby's continued, uncharacteristic terror at every subsequent gathering, stopped making the joke.

She told herself animals were unpredictable, that correlation was not causation, the same tired phrase she'd once leaned on to explain away Marcus's text and Tyler's firing, except now the phrase had worn thin enough that she could feel, even as she reached for it, how little weight it actually carried anymore.

She mentioned it once to Sabrina, carefully, testing the words before she committed to them fully. "Do animals ever — react differently, once you've gone further into this?"

Sabrina's face, for just a moment, lost its usual sharp composure. "Some of them get more sensitive to it than we are," she said finally, choosing her words with a care Ali had never seen from her. "They

don't have the sophistication to talk themselves out of what they're sensing. We do. That's supposed to be an advantage." She did not elaborate further, and something in the way she changed the subject afterward told Ali not to ask again.



"A man's enemies will be those of his own household." — Matthew 10:36

Kayla did not come back after November. Ali noticed the absence the way she noticed most things by February — distantly, a fact registered and then filed away beneath the more urgent business of the day, though some nights, in the rare stretches when sleep actually held, she dreamed not of the faceless watcher or the shape behind her mirror but of the two-bedroom apartment with the broken dishwasher, twenty-two years old and laughing about nothing in particular, a version of friendship that had never once required her to be impressive.

Her father-shaped absence of a childhood had trained her early to expect people to leave; what she had not expected, even after everything, was how many people would leave now, on her account rather than their own. Two of her oldest coworkers at the marketing firm — the position she'd finally been promoted into after Tyler's fall, a promotion she now barely thought about, dwarfed as it was by what Selene earned in a good week — stopped inviting her to lunch sometime in January, their excuses growing thinner and more obviously manufactured until they simply stopped bothering to manufacture them at all.

Her aunt Carol called on a Sunday evening in late February, and this time Ali picked up, mostly out of a guilty accumulation of three unreturned calls she could no longer justify ignoring.

"I saw one of your videos," Carol said, without much preamble, her voice careful in the particular way of a woman raised to avoid direct conflict at any cost, laying the words down one at a time like she was testing the floor for weak boards before committing her full weight to it. "Sarah showed it to me. The one where you're — reading somebody's future, I guess, with the cards. Ali, honey, I need to ask you something and I need you not to get upset with me for asking."

"Okay," Ali said, already feeling the old defensive posture climbing up through her chest, the one she'd worn her whole life whenever an adult's voice took on that particular careful tone.

"Have you gotten mixed up in something?" Carol asked. "Your mother — Lord rest her, she got mixed up in plenty over the years, and I watched it eat pieces of her a little at a time until there wasn't enough left of the woman I grew up with to recognize most days. I'm not saying you're doing what she did. I'm saying I know what it looks like when somebody I love starts disappearing into something, and

something about that video scared me, Ali. You didn't look like yourself. You looked like somebody wearing your face."

Ali laughed the question off — the same brittle, practiced laugh she'd used on Marcus, on Kayla, on every voice that had gotten too close to a truth she'd built an entire second identity to avoid examining — and told Carol she was just exploring some new interests, that it wasn't anything to worry about, that she appreciated the concern but really, truly, she had never felt more like herself in her life. She heard, even as she said it, how hollow the reassurance sounded stretched over a phone line, how little conviction it carried compared to the ease with which she now delivered the same reassurance to strangers on camera every morning.

Carol was quiet for a long moment. "All right," she said finally, in a voice that made clear she did not believe a word of it. "You know where I am if that changes." She did not call again for many weeks, and Ali, God help her, felt something closer to relief than grief when the calls stopped, one more voice from the old life gone quiet, one less person left whose concern she had to find the energy to deflect.

Even Marcus, who had circled back into her life with such promising attentiveness back in the fall, had drifted off again by February — not with the dramatic explanation of Ali's mystical manifestation exercise, this time, but with a quieter, more ordinary discomfort, the kind a man feels around a woman who has started wearing black exclusively, who keeps a locked room in her apartment she won't explain, who flinches at mirrors and startles at sudden knocks and grows, week by week, harder to reach even when she was sitting directly across the table from him. "You're different," he told her, the last time they saw each other, not unkindly, more confused than accusatory. "I don't know how to explain it. You're here, but it's like something else is using your face."

Ali had laughed at that too, in the moment. She thought about it more than she let herself admit, afterward, alone in her apartment with the second bedroom door closed and the candles inside it burning down toward another spell.

She was, by February, profoundly alone in every relationship that had once anchored her — surrounded, instead, by a circle of people who called her gifted and Selene and chosen, who never once asked her to be anything other than exactly what she had already become, and who had, without her fully registering the trade, become the only family she had left standing.



*"Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap." —
Galatians 6:7*

She finally broke her silence about the fear at a Tuesday gathering in early March, unable to carry the weight of it entirely alone any longer, the mirror-face and the 3:11 wakings and Winston's low continuous growl and the word Mine, spoken so close to her ear she could still sometimes feel the ghost of breath behind it, all spilling out of her at once in the candlelit back room of The Sacred Ember, the same room where all of this had started.

Diane's face, listening, went pale in a way Ali had never seen. But it was Corinne, present that night for one of her occasional visits to Diane's more modest circle, who answered first, and answered with the practiced, unhurried confidence of someone who had fielded this exact confession many times before from many frightened initiates.

"This is exactly what we told you to expect," Corinne said, not unkindly, reaching across the table to take Ali's trembling hand in both of hers. "You didn't listen closely enough, sweetheart, or you'd have heard it as good news instead of bad. The veil thinning, the increased contact, the sensitivity — this is enlightenment, Ali. This is exactly what the deepest levels of this practice were always going to feel like from the inside, before you're strong enough to hold what you're being given without flinching from it. Every single person in Meridian's inner circle went through some version of what you're describing. Harold didn't sleep through a full night for nearly a year. Patrice used to see faces in every reflective surface in her house for months before it settled. It's not punishment. It's not a warning to stop." She squeezed Ali's hand, her flat gray eyes warm now with what looked, in the candlelight, almost like genuine tenderness. "It's the price of the door swinging fully open, instead of standing only halfway ajar the way it was for Diane's little circle here, God love them. You wanted more than a front porch, Ali. This is what more actually costs. Everyone who's ever gained real power in this world has paid some version of this toll. The question isn't whether it's frightening. Of course it's frightening. The question is whether you're willing to keep paying it for what's waiting on the other side."

"And the word," Ali said, quieter than she meant to. "The one it said. Mine."

Something flickered behind Corinne's composed face — there and gone so fast Ali might have imagined it, except she had spent seventeen months learning to read exactly this kind of room, and what she read, for one unguarded instant, looked almost like fear wearing an older, more practiced woman's skin.

"Possessive language is common at your stage," Corinne said, recovering smoothly. "Your guide is establishing a bond. Claiming isn't always a threat, Ali. Sometimes it's simply a declaration of investment. Would you rather it were indifferent to you?"

Ali wanted, badly, to believe her. She had wanted, for over a year now, to believe every reassurance this circle of women had ever offered her, because the alternative — that she had made some catastrophic, unrecoverable mistake, that the power she'd built her entire new identity around was

not a gift being unwrapped but a debt being called in — was too large, too devastating, to hold in the same body that had to get up tomorrow and film a live reading for eleven thousand strangers who called her the real thing.

So she believed Corinne. She let herself be held, and soothed, and reassured, and she drove home that night repeating the word enlightenment to herself like a working of her own, a small spell of self-persuasion, until the word had smoothed back down over the rawer, truer word underneath it that some quiet, unsilenced corner of her had already started, against her own will, to think instead.

Oppression.

She did not let herself finish the thought. She reached her apartment, climbed the stairs past Frank's door where Winston had already begun, muffled through the wood, his low continuous growl, and let herself into the Sanctum to light a candle for peaceful sleep, a working she had performed four nights running with results that had, so far, delivered nothing at all.



"And the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." — 2 Corinthians 4:4

What Ali could not see, that March, standing at the center of a life built entirely on the premise that she had finally been chosen — the money, the influence, the sixty thousand strangers waiting each morning to be told what the cards revealed about their own hidden hearts, the newer initiates now looking up at her the exact way she had once looked up at Diane — was the shape of the trade she had actually made, laid out with a clarity no working of hers could have produced, had she still possessed the eyes to read it plainly.

She had traded a mother's silence for a coven's applause, and told herself it was healing.

She had traded a God who never seemed to answer for a presence that answered constantly, immediately, insatiably, and told herself it was finally being heard, without once asking why a being so eager to speak to her had never, not once in seventeen months, spoken a single word of the Name that every false light in every deceived century has always, without exception, refused to say.

She had traded Kayla, and her aunt Carol, and Marcus, and the version of herself that used to laugh about nothing over a broken dishwasher, for a circle of people who required nothing of her except that she keep paying, in sleep and safety and the last unclaimed corners of her own soul, for the privilege of being told, over and over, in rooms full of candlelight and old money, that she was special.

Somewhere in the deep, unexamined architecture of her, the fifteen-year-old who had once closed her eyes in an empty fellowship hall and asked God to explain the ditch, to explain Dale's hand on the doorknob, to explain why nobody ever came — that girl was still present, still watching, still keeping some small flickering ledger of every warning sign her adult self kept choosing to override. She had not vanished. She had simply gone quiet, the way a person goes quiet after being told, often enough and by voices persuasive enough, that her fear is proof of growth rather than evidence of danger.

Ali Gibson stood at the center of everything she had once wanted — power, money, a family that had chosen her, thousands of strangers who hung on her every word — and did not yet understand that she was not standing at a summit at all. She was standing at the bottom of a well that had convinced her, level by careful level, that going down was the only direction that had ever led up.

She would not understand it, not fully, not in a way that could no longer be argued away by Corinne's warm hands and Diane's trembling reassurance, until the night a young woman she had never met, following a working Ali herself had taught in a video watched two hundred thousand times, stopped breathing on a bedroom floor three states away, and the silence on the other side of the door Ali had spent seventeen months prying open finally, for the first time, answered her with something other than love.

Chapter 6 – The Price of Power

*"For Satan comes disguised, working counterfeit miracles, signs, and wonders." — 2
Thessalonians 2:9*

By April, the toll had a shape Ali could no longer pretend not to see, though she kept trying, out of the same stubborn discipline that had carried her through every previous warning sign: a refusal to look directly at the thing that frightened her, on the theory that things unlooked-at could not fully become real.

Her body was the first place the debt collected. She had lost eleven pounds since January without changing anything about how she ate, a fact her mirror confirmed with a hollowness around her collarbones that made her look, in unflattering light, closer to forty than twenty-nine. Her hands had developed a faint, persistent tremor that she now hid the way she'd once hidden her arms in long sleeves, tucking them into her lap during client sessions, curling them around a mug of tea she rarely drank, learning to gesture with her forearms instead of her fingers whenever she filmed a video, because the tremor showed up plainly on camera and she had, twice now, fielded worried comments

asking whether she was all right. A small, involuntary twitch had taken up residence beneath her left eye sometime in March and never fully left, flaring worse on the nights sleep abandoned her completely, which by April had become most of them.

She had started, without quite admitting to herself why, keeping the bathroom mirror in the Sanctum covered with a black cloth except when she absolutely needed it, a habit she recognized, with a discomfort she swallowed rather than examined, as identical to something her grandmother used to do in houses of mourning — covering mirrors after a death, an old superstition Ali had once found quaint and had never expected to find herself quietly, urgently practicing in her own apartment at twenty-nine years old.

The money kept arriving. That was the strange, disorienting cruelty of it — the visible ledger of her life showed nothing but gain, Preston's quarterly statements climbing in numbers that would have made the old Ali, the marketing coordinator in sensible flats, weep with relief, while the invisible ledger, the one written in sleep and safety and the steadiness of her own hands, ran a deficit so severe she could feel herself going bankrupt in some deeper currency even as her checking account swelled. She did not yet have language for the fact that these two ledgers were not separate accounts at all, but the same account, viewed from two different distances — that what she was gaining had never once, in eighteen months, arrived without something else, something load-bearing, quietly being removed from beneath her to make room for it.



"You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day." — Psalm 91:5

The nightmare that finally broke something loose in her came on the second Tuesday of April, three nights after a Meridian gathering where Ali had, for the first time, led a working of her own before the full circle rather than simply participating in one — a binding, at Corinne's invitation and with the whole room watching, meant to strengthen the collective protection around Meridian's members, an honor Corinne had described as being extended to almost no one this early in their initiation.

She fell asleep exhausted that night, the particular hollowed-out exhaustion of a body that has been asked to perform ceremony on borrowed reserves, and found herself, in the dream, standing in the trailer at the end of Miller's Creek Road — not as she remembered it faded by twenty years of distance, but rendered with a hyperreal, assaulting clarity, every water stain on the ceiling exact, every scorch mark on the stove exact, the particular smell of cigarette smoke and spoiled milk so vivid she gagged on it even asleep.

Dale was there. Not the blurred, half-remembered shape her waking memory had mercifully softened him into, but exact, present, sitting in the ruined recliner with a beer sweating in his hand, looking at her with an expression she recognized instantly and had spent twenty years trying to forget. Ali tried to run and found, as dreamers always find, that her legs would not obey her, moving through air gone thick as water while the hallway to her childhood bedroom stretched longer with every step, the bedroom door at the end of it standing open onto a darkness that had no floor, no walls, only an endless black that somehow still managed to feel like a room, still managed to feel occupied.

A voice came from inside that darkness, not Dale's, not anyone's she recognized, though it wore, disturbingly, an accent of warmth she associated with Diane, with Corinne, with every voice that had ever told her she was chosen. Come see what's really yours, it said. You've been afraid of this room your whole life. Come see there was never anything in here to be afraid of. Come see it's only ever been waiting for you to come home.

Ali woke with a scream already halfway out of her throat, loud enough that she heard, through her bedroom wall, her upstairs neighbor's startled voice asking if everything was all right, loud enough that she spent the next ten minutes shaking too hard to answer honestly when she called back that she was fine, just a bad dream. She sat on the edge of her bed in the dark, sweat-soaked, and understood, with a clarity that cut through eighteen months of practiced self-persuasion, that whatever had shown her that hallway had not been offering her comfort. It had been showing her, with a kind of gloating precision, exactly how much of her oldest wound it already had access to — how thoroughly it had been walking through the rooms of her memory, cataloguing every door, long before she had ever signed her name in blood on a page in a basement forty minutes outside town.

She did not sleep again that night. She sat in her living room with every light in the apartment burning, the way she had not done since she was small enough to still believe a light switch could hold back everything waiting in a ditch, and for the first time in longer than she could remember, she found herself crying without any performance in it at all — not the practiced, camera-ready vulnerability she'd learned to monetize, but the raw, wracking, undignified kind she hadn't allowed herself since she was a teenager cutting thin lines into her own thigh because it was the only pain that had ever made sense to her.



"When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest... then it brings seven other spirits more evil than itself." — Luke 11:24–26

Something had changed in the quality of the contact after that night, and Ali was not the only one who noticed it.

The voice that had once come to her gently, almost lovingly, in dreams and half-waking moments and the warm, sourceless certainty she had learned to call her guide, began arriving now with an edge it had never carried before — impatient where it had once been patient, demanding where it had once merely suggested. She woke one night in mid-April not to a whisper but to what felt, in the disoriented half-second of waking, like a hand closing around her throat, gone the instant her eyes opened, leaving behind a raw, bruised soreness that lingered into the following afternoon and that she covered, filming her scheduled livestream that evening, with a scarf she told her viewers was "just an aesthetic choice."

Her cards, when she read them now — for clients, for the newer initiates she mentored, even for herself — had begun turning up the same handful of ominous images with a frequency that defied any reasonable shuffle: the Tower, upright, again and again; the Devil, chained figures kneeling before a horned, leering presence; Death, which she had always been careful to explain to frightened clients meant transformation, not literal dying, a reassurance that had started, sometime in April, to feel less like teaching and more like a lie she was telling herself as much as them.

She mentioned the change to Wren one evening, catching her alone in the Sacred Ember's back room before the others arrived, and Wren's face, hearing the details, went carefully, deliberately blank in a way that told Ali more than any words could have.

"It escalates for everyone eventually," Wren said, choosing her words the way a person chooses footing on ice. "The gentle version is only ever the introduction. Once you're bound in fully — once you've led a working in front of the whole circle, the way you did last week — it stops needing to court you. You're not being recruited anymore, Ali. You're being collected." She looked, for a moment, like she wanted to say more, her jaw working around something she ultimately swallowed. "I probably shouldn't have said that last part."

"Say the rest of it," Ali said, something cold moving through her chest.

"There isn't a rest of it," Wren said, too quickly, and busied herself relighting a candle that hadn't gone out. "Forget I said anything. Corinne's right about most of this. I just — I get tired sometimes. That's all it is."

Ali did not forget it. She carried the word collected with her for days afterward, turning it over the way she'd once turned over the rose quartz Diane had first pressed into her palm, except this stone had no comforting weight to it at all, only a cold, growing certainty that something in the language of her own chosen family had just, for one unguarded sentence, told her the truth.



"Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." — 1 Peter 5:8

The incident that finally, publicly, could no longer be explained away happened during a livestream on the last Friday of April, watched live by just under four thousand people and, in the clipped and reposted aftermath, by several hundred thousand more.

Ali had been performing a reading for a viewer's submitted question — a young woman asking, with the particular breathless urgency of someone in genuine crisis, whether she should leave her husband — and had drawn, near the end of the spread, a card that should not have been in the deck at all. It was not one of her own cards. It was blank on both sides, a smooth, featureless rectangle exactly the size and weight of the others, slotted seamlessly among them despite the fact that Ali had personally shuffled and cut that deck, on camera, not ninety seconds earlier.

She stared at it for four full seconds of dead air, long enough that later viewers, rewatching the clip frame by frame, would debate for weeks in the comment section what, exactly, they were looking at in the background — a shift in the shadow behind her that several thousand people swore moved independently of anything in the room, a darkening at the edge of the frame that the platform's own compression artifacts could not fully explain away no matter how many skeptics tried.

What everyone agreed on, skeptic and believer alike, was what happened to Ali's voice. When she finally spoke, the words that came out of her mouth were not, by her own later insistence, words she had chosen to say. She heard herself, distantly, as though listening from the far end of a long hallway, tell the anonymous young woman on the other end of the stream — in a voice pitched lower than her own, flattened of every trace of the warm, confiding cadence Selene had spent two years cultivating — that she should not leave, that leaving would be the greatest mistake of her life, that some doors, once walked through, could never be walked back out of, and that she would regret it forever if she tried.

The stream cut off four seconds later. Ali would never fully remember cutting it, though the footage showed her own hand reaching for the camera with a jerking, marionette stiffness that did not match anything she consciously recalled deciding to do.

She sat on her living room floor afterward for over an hour, camera dark, phone buzzing continuously beside her with notifications she could not make herself look at, replaying the four seconds of dead air and the flattened, wrong voice that had come out of her own throat, and understood, with a horror that finally, finally cut all the way through eighteen months of careful self-persuasion, that something had used her — not spoken through her with her permission, the way she had always

imagined her "gift" working, but reached in and moved her mouth the way a hand moves a puppet, while she watched from somewhere just behind her own eyes, unable to stop it, unable even to fully feel her own body while it happened.

The video, clipped from four different angles by viewers who'd been recording their own screens, spread faster than anything Selene had ever posted intentionally. Half the internet decided she'd staged it for engagement. The other half decided, with an eager, hungry fascination that frightened Ali more than the mockery did, that they had just witnessed something genuinely, unmistakably real, and her follower count, grotesquely, climbed by another eleven thousand within forty-eight hours.



"What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" — Mark 8:36

The message from a stranger named Denise Farrow arrived nine days later, on a Sunday afternoon, sliding into Ali's inbox alongside the usual flood of reading requests and prayer-hand emojis, distinguishable from the rest only by the subject line, typed in the raw, unpunctuated urgency of a person composing it through tears: please i need you to see this before anyone else does.

Ali almost didn't open it. She had learned, over two years, to triage the volume of messages she received, and something in the subject line's desperation matched a hundred other messages she'd learned to skim past — women in crisis, hoping Selene's attention might be the thing that finally saved them, a role Ali had grown both practiced and quietly exhausted at performing. She opened it anyway, some instinct she would spend a long time afterward wishing she had ignored.

The message was long, and it took Ali several paragraphs to understand what she was reading: that Denise's nineteen-year-old daughter, a girl named Jasmine, had discovered Selene's account eight months earlier during a difficult stretch after a breakup, had followed her advice with a devotion Denise described, in retrospect, as troubling in ways she hadn't recognized until it was too late — the crystals, the cord-cutting rituals, the increasingly elaborate workings Jasmine had begun performing alone in her bedroom, following, with meticulous, screenshot-documented care, the twelve-minute candle-binding walkthrough Ali had recorded and posted in March, the one that had been watched, by the time Denise wrote her message, nearly two hundred thousand times.

Three nights earlier, Jasmine had attempted what her friends later described to Denise as an advanced version of the binding — a working meant, according to the notes found afterward in Jasmine's journal, to sever what she called a spiritual attachment she believed was draining her, performed alone, at night, with a circle salted across her bedroom floor and every element of the ritual

pushed further than the original video had ever instructed, further even than Ali herself had ever personally attempted.

Jasmine's roommate found her the following morning, unresponsive on the bedroom floor inside the broken circle of salt, the candles burned down to nothing around her, her face, the roommate told the police and later, in a phone call Ali would never fully recover from, told Denise directly, wearing an expression of such total, unrelieved terror that the medical examiner's initial report, before landing on cardiac arrest of undetermined origin in an otherwise healthy nineteen-year-old, had noted it as unusual enough to mention.

I'm not writing to blame you, Denise's message went on, though I won't pretend some part of me does. I'm writing because somebody has to tell you what happened, because I don't think you know, and because if there is any chance — any chance at all — that what my daughter believed she found in you and your videos is real, then I need you to understand that it took her from me, and I need you to stop teaching other mothers' daughters how to open doors none of us understand how to close.

Ali read the message four times before she could make herself stand up from the floor where she'd sunk down reading it. She read it a fifth time through tears she could not stop, and a sixth time after that, searching, with a growing, sickening desperation, for some detail that would let her explain this away the way she had explained away every other warning sign for eighteen straight months — Renata's ex-husband's shattered spine, Tyler's ruined career, the mirror-face, the word Mine spoken close against her ear in the dark. She found no such detail. There was only a nineteen-year-old girl named Jasmine Farrow, dead on her bedroom floor inside a circle of salt, having followed, step by careful step, a working Ali herself had taught to two hundred thousand strangers with the easy, practiced confidence of a woman who had never once stopped to ask what she was actually inviting into the rooms of people who trusted her.



"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."
— Romans 6:23

She called Corinne before she called anyone else, some last vestige of eighteen months' conditioning still reaching, in crisis, for the people who had always told her they had the answers.

Corinne's response, when it came, arrived with a coldness that finally, unmistakably, showed Ali something she had spent two years refusing to look at directly.

"That's tragic," Corinne said, and her voice carried, Ali registered with a distant, disbelieving horror, no more weight than she might have given a stranger's minor car trouble. "Genuinely. But Ali, you have to separate yourself from this. You didn't perform that working. You didn't push it beyond its safe parameters, alone, at night, with no guidance and no protection circle worth the name. This girl made choices. Every practitioner makes choices about how far to go, and every practitioner bears the consequences of her own choices. You can't be responsible for strangers on the internet doing reckless things with information that was always meant to be handled carefully, under supervision, by people who'd earned the right to it. This is exactly why initiation exists, Ali — to protect people from doing precisely what this girl did alone in a bedroom with no one to guide her."

"She's dead, Corinne." Ali heard her own voice come out flat, stripped of everything but the bare fact of it. "A nineteen-year-old girl is dead."

"And I'm sorry for her mother," Corinne said, in a tone that made unmistakably clear how little of the sentence she actually meant. "But you need to think very carefully, right now, about what you post publicly regarding this. Any admission of responsibility opens you to liability, and worse than liability — it opens a door in your own protections that I promise you, you do not want opened right now, of all times. Grieve privately if you need to. Do not perform this grief for your following. Do not, under any circumstances, suggest publicly that the practice itself is dangerous. That is not a message Meridian can allow to spread, and I would be doing you a disservice as your teacher if I let you make that mistake out of a misplaced sense of guilt."

Ali sat holding the phone long after Corinne had hung up, hearing, underneath every word of that call, a truth so plain it astonished her that it had taken this long, this much cost, to finally see it: that not one person in eighteen months of promises about family and belonging and being finally, finally chosen had once, in this moment, when it mattered more than it had ever mattered, asked her how she was doing. Not one of them had asked about Jasmine's mother, sitting somewhere right now in an unbearable silence with a dead daughter's belongings still in boxes. They had asked, instead, about liability. About protections. About messaging.

She thought, for the first time in longer than she could remember, of Kayla standing in her apartment doorway saying you didn't need crystals for that, you just needed to let me in — and of her aunt Carol's careful, frightened voice on the phone asking have you gotten mixed up in something — and of Wren, sitting rigid in a parked car with the engine running, telling her ask me again in a year, and Ali finally, for the first time since a rainy Saturday in a candle shop two years earlier, let herself ask the question she had spent every single day since then finding some new way to avoid.

What if none of this was ever love at all.



"Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness." — Isaiah 5:20

She called Patrice next, then Harold, working through the short list of people she had spent two years learning to call family, and found, with each call, the same pattern repeating itself with a consistency that felt, by the third call, almost clinical.

Patrice's first question was whether Jasmine's mother had mentioned an attorney. Harold, reached at what sounded like a dinner party, took the news with a distracted, sympathetic murmur before pivoting, within ninety seconds, to reassuring Ali that "these things happen sometimes, unfortunately, in every discipline that deals with real forces," delivered in the same tone he might have used to describe a client's unlucky trade. Only Beth, the elementary school teacher who had been kind to Ali since her very first Tuesday at The Sacred Ember, cried on the phone with her — genuinely, audibly cried — and even Beth, in the end, could not answer the one question Ali kept asking, over and over, in every call: does anyone else feel like this is our fault.

"You have to understand," Beth said finally, her voice thick, "that asking that question out loud, to the wrong person in this circle, can cost you standing you've spent two years building. I'm not saying that to scare you. I'm saying it because I love you, and because I made the mistake of asking a version of that question myself, four years ago, about someone else, and I watched what happened to my standing afterward. Be careful who you let hear you doubting, Ali. That's the only advice I have left to give you tonight."

Ali hung up from that final call and sat for a long time in the dark, understanding, with a completeness that finally reached every corner of her, that the family she had traded Kayla and Carol and Marcus for had never once, not on the worst night of her life, offered her comfort without also, in the same breath, offering her a warning about what her grief might cost her if she let it show too plainly. She thought of Corinne's flat gray eyes across a coffee shop table eight months earlier, promising a family that actually delivers, and understood now, far too late for Jasmine Farrow, exactly what that family had always actually been delivering, and to whom.



"The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." — Psalm 34:18

She did not sleep that night either, but for the first time in months, the sleeplessness held something other than dread in it — a raw, exhausted clarity, the particular quality of silence that follows a very loud noise finally stopping.

She sat at her kitchen table with Denise Farrow's message open on her phone, reading it again and again until the words had worn a groove into her, and at some point past three in the morning — not 3:11, she would notice later, some strange mercy in that small detail, the first night in months the hour had passed without incident — she found herself standing in front of the drawer in her bedroom where her grandmother's small wooden cross still lay folded in its handkerchief, exactly where it had lain, mostly forgotten, for years.

She did not put it on. She was not ready, that night, for anything so decisive as putting it on. But she held it in her open palm for a long time, feeling the worn, familiar shape of it, and she did something she had not done with any sincerity since she was fifteen years old in an empty fellowship hall, waiting for an answer that never came.

She did not know, that night, whether she believed anyone was listening. She had spent two years being told, with total conviction, by people who loved the sound of her gratitude more than they had ever loved her, that something was listening — and that something, whatever it actually was, had just cost a nineteen-year-old girl her life and had not, in the one conversation that should have mattered most, produced a single ounce of remorse from anyone who claimed to be Ali's family.

I don't know if you're there, she thought, or maybe whispered, alone at her kitchen table with a small wooden cross pressed hard enough into her palm to leave a mark. I don't know if you ever were. But if you are — if there's any part of what I used to believe that was ever actually true — I don't know how to find my way out of this by myself anymore. I don't think I have been myself in a long time. I don't think I know who's been driving.

No voice answered her, not the warm, insatiable one that had filled her nights for two years, and not, that she could discern in the ordinary predawn quiet of her kitchen, any other voice either. But something in her chest, for the first time since a black candle had guttered sideways in a windowless room a year and a half earlier, did not feel watched.

It felt, instead, for one brief, unfamiliar moment, almost like being alone in a way that was safe rather than punishing — and Ali Gibson, twenty-nine years old, kneeling in her own kitchen at the bottom of the deepest well she had ever dug for herself, understood, without yet knowing what to do about it, that something in the last two years had finally, catastrophically cracked, and that whatever came through the crack next would either save her or finish what the well had already started.

Chapter 7 – You Can't Be the Bride of Christ and Satan's Side Chick. No, It's Not Right.

*"What fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial?" — 2
Corinthians 6:14–15*

The week after Denise Farrow's message, Ali did the only thing she could think to do with the wreckage sitting inside her: she pulled back.

She did not renounce anything, not yet, not out loud, not even fully to herself. She simply stopped answering Corinne's calls with the same eager promptness she'd trained herself into for eighteen months. She canceled two client sessions, telling herself and them it was illness, and let a third go unanswered entirely, a first for a woman who had never once, in two years of building Selene into an income, allowed a paying client to feel unimportant. She skipped a Tuesday gathering at The Sacred Ember for the first time since the week she'd walked through its beaded curtain, and then skipped the one after that, and found, with a small, guilty relief she didn't examine too closely, that the sky did not fall for missing it.

She did not know, that week, what she was reaching toward. She only knew what she was reaching away from — the cold, liability-shaped comfort Corinne had offered her over the phone, the careful, self-protective silence Patrice and Harold had both offered in their own ways, the particular numbness of a family that had never once, on the worst night of her life, asked how she was doing. She thought of the wooden cross still sitting in her open palm at three in the morning, of the strange, unfamiliar sensation of not feeling watched, and she found herself returning to that drawer more nights than not, not yet praying, not yet anything so definite as that, but sitting with the small worn object in her hand the way a person sits at the edge of a pool she isn't ready to enter, testing the water with one bare foot.

She did not understand, in that first uncertain week, that she was standing at the exact hinge point every soul eventually reaches, the place where two kingdoms make their final, most desperate claim — and that the kingdom she had served for two years does not release its own quietly, does not simply shrug and wish a departing servant well. It had never asked her permission to claim her in the first place. It was not about to start asking permission now, on the strength of one grieving week and a half-remembered handkerchief in a drawer.



"Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." — James 4:7

The first sign that her withdrawal had been noticed came on a Thursday, nine days after Jasmine Farrow's death, in the form of a text from Wren that contained nothing but three words: Corinne is furious.

Ali stared at the message for a long time before setting her phone face-down on the counter, an act of small, deliberate defiance that felt, in the moment, far more significant than it looked. She had spent two years arranging her entire life around the comfort and approval of the people in that circle, and the simple physical gesture of turning her phone away from her, refusing to compose an immediate, appeasing reply, sat in her chest with the strange, disproportionate weight of an actual rebellion.

That night, for the first time in nearly two weeks, she did not go looking for the cross in the drawer. She went to bed early instead, exhausted in a way that felt, for once, more like ordinary human tiredness than the hollowed-out depletion she'd grown used to, and fell asleep almost immediately — a small mercy she would understand, by morning, as exactly that: a mercy, brief and undeserved, granted right before the worst night of her adult life.

She woke at 3:11.

She had woken at that hour so many times over the preceding eight months that some numbed, resigned part of her no longer expected anything different from it — a whisper, a cold patch of air, a pressure on the mattress that would lift again within minutes if she simply lay still and waited it out, the way she had waited out every frightening thing in her life since she was six years old in a ditch behind a trailer. This time was different from the first half-second, and she knew it was different the way an animal knows, in its body, before its mind has caught up: the air in the room did not merely cool. It curdled, thickening with a pressure that pressed against her eardrums like the deep end of a swimming pool, and the darkness at the foot of her bed did not merely gather. It rose.

She would spend the rest of her life unable to fully describe what she saw that night, not because the memory faded — it never once faded, not even years later, not even after everything that came after — but because human language, she came to understand, was simply not built to hold it, the way a bucket is not built to hold fire. What she could describe, what she told exactly one person in full detail years afterward and no one else ever again, was an impression of vast and coiling wrongness given the barest suggestion of shape, tall enough that its presence seemed to compress the ceiling downward, and eyes — if they were eyes — that held no pupil, no white, nothing human in them at all, only a flat, hungry attention that made her simultaneously the most important thing in the universe and the least, a thing to be consumed rather than beheld.

It spoke without a mouth she could see, and its voice arrived not through her ears but somewhere behind her sternum, vibrating up through her ribs like a struck bell.

You think a piece of wood in a drawer changes anything, it said, and the words carried a contempt so total it felt, for a moment, like being flayed. You think two weeks of sulking undoes two years of choosing us, every single day, every candle, every working, every stranger's despair you turned into your own comfort. You are ours, Ali Gibson. You signed it in your own blood on a night you chose freely, no one forced your hand to that page. And you cannot go crawling back to some borrowed god now that the bill has finally come due. You cannot be the bride of Christ and Satan's side chick. It does not work that way. It has never once, in the history of every soul we have ever collected, worked that way. No. It's not right, and you know it isn't. You made your choice in a basement with your blood on a page, and we do not release what we have paid for.

Ali could not scream. Her throat had locked entirely, some ancient animal system in her simply overriding the command, and she lay rigid, staring up into eyes that were not eyes, understanding with a clarity more total than any fear she had ever known that she was, in that exact moment, closer to death or to something worse than death than she had ever been in her life — closer than the ditch, closer than Dale's hand on the doorknob, closer than any danger her childhood had ever manufactured, because none of those things had ever looked at her the way this thing looked at her: not as a person to be harmed, but as property being inventoried.

And then, as suddenly as it had risen, it receded — not gently, not mercifully, but the way a wave recedes, drawing back only to gather itself for the next one, and Ali understood, gasping alone in her ordinary bedroom with her ordinary ceiling fan ticking its uneven tick above her, that this was not an ending. It was a warning shot.



*"You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him." —
John 8:44*

She did not sleep again that night, and she did not, this time, spend the following morning telling herself it had been a dream.

She sat at her kitchen table as dawn came up gray and ordinary outside her window, the most ordinary thing she had seen in hours, and she made herself, for the first time in two years, actually think — not feel, not hope, not perform belief for an audience or a coven or her own desperate hunger to

matter, but think, the way she had once, briefly, at fifteen years old, tried to think her way honestly toward whether God existed and whether He cared.

She thought about Diane's very first warning, delivered with trembling hands across a velvet table: power that comes with no cost attached is the rarest thing in this world, in every world, somebody is always paying. She thought about Wren, rigid in a parked car with the engine running: you're not being recruited anymore, you're being collected. She thought about Corinne on the phone, cold as a closing door, worried about liability while a mother somewhere sat with her dead daughter's boxed belongings. She thought about the word *Mine*, spoken close against her ear in the dark eight months earlier, and understood now, with a sick, plummeting clarity, that it had never been a term of endearment at all. It had been a term of ownership, spoken the way a man might speak it over a car, a house, a tool purchased and expected to perform.

She thought, finally, about the sentence the thing at the foot of her bed had spoken, the one that would not leave her no matter how many hours passed: you cannot be the bride of Christ and Satan's side chick. It had meant it, she understood now, as a threat, as a wall built to keep her from ever trying to cross back — but sitting alone in the gray dawn light, turning the sentence over and over the way she'd once turned over tarot cards searching for hidden meaning, Ali found something buried inside it that the thing speaking it had surely never intended her to find.

It had told her the truth.

Not the threat it meant to be. The actual, structural truth underneath the threat: that there really were only two kingdoms, that a person really could not stand with one foot in each forever, that the entire architecture of the last two years of her life — every candle, every card, every dollar Preston Cole had funneled into her account, every stranger's despair she had monetized without ever once asking what she was actually selling them — had been built on the premise that she could keep taking from one kingdom while still, someday, quietly, without cost, returning to the other. The thing in her bedroom had not been lying to frighten her. It had been furious because the truth it spoke was actually true, and it knew, better than Ali herself yet did, that a truth spoken in fury can sometimes do exactly the opposite of what the one shouting it intended.

She thought of Grace Fellowship, of Kyle's guitar and his easy confidence, of the God she had decided, at fifteen, did not care enough to answer her. She thought of thirteen years spent building an entire identity on that decision, and of two years spent building a second, darker identity on top of the wreckage of the first, and she understood, with a grief so large it felt almost like drowning, that she did not actually know — had never once, in twenty-nine years, actually tested — whether the God of that empty fellowship hall had truly been silent, or whether a frightened, exhausted fifteen-year-old girl had simply stopped listening for an answer three minutes before one might have come.



"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." — John 10:10

Corinne arrived at her apartment unannounced two days later, dressed not in the flowing, ceremonial black of the circle but in the same sharp, tasteful clothes she'd worn to their first coffee meeting eight months earlier, as though she had deliberately chosen the ordinary, reasonable version of herself for this particular visit.

"You're frightening people," Corinne said, once she'd settled, uninvited, onto Ali's couch. "Missed sessions. Missed gatherings. Wren tells me you've stopped responding to the group chat entirely. I understand grief, Ali. I have buried people too, in forty years of this work. But you cannot simply stop, the way you seem to be attempting. You know that. I told you, the very first time we spoke, that there wasn't a clean way back out once you were fully in. I wasn't being dramatic. I was being accurate."

"Something came to my bedroom two nights ago," Ali said, watching Corinne's face carefully as she said it, the way she had learned, over two years in this world, to watch for the flicker of truth beneath a composed expression. "It wasn't gentle. It wasn't loving. It told me I belonged to it. It told me I couldn't come back to God because I'd already chosen this, in blood, on a page in a basement." Her voice shook, but she kept going. "You told me, eight months ago, that this was the price of enlightenment. I want you to look at me and tell me, honestly, that what visited me two nights ago was enlightenment and not something that was always exactly what it looked like."

For one long moment, something in Corinne's flat gray eyes wavered — not guilt, exactly, Ali would decide later, turning the moment over for months afterward, but something closer to recognition, the specific, weary recognition of a woman who had watched this exact scene play out before, more than once, across forty years, and had made her peace, a long time ago, with which side of it she was always going to choose to stand on.

"What visited you," Corinne said finally, her voice quieter than Ali had ever heard it, "is what always eventually visits everyone who goes as deep as you went as fast as you went. I am not going to insult you by pretending otherwise, not after what happened to that girl, not after what I've watched happen to you these past two weeks. But Ali — sweetheart — there is no clean exit from this. There has never once, in my forty years, been a clean exit. You don't get to hand back what you were given. You can only decide whether you're going to keep taking what comes with it, or whether you're going to stand in the doorway refusing both rooms, which is, I promise you, the single most dangerous place a person in your position can stand. At least inside the circle, you have protections. Structure. People who understand what's hunting you and know, at least partially, how to keep it at bay. Out there, alone,

with nothing but a stranger's grief and a piece of wood in a drawer? You will not survive what you started, Ali. I am not threatening you. I am telling you, as close to a friend as I have left the standing to be, the plainest truth I know."

It was, Ali would understand only much later, both the most honest and the most deceptive thing anyone in that world had ever said to her — true in its diagnosis of the danger, and monstrously false in its prescribed cure, offering her, as the only alternative to destruction, deeper submission to the very kingdom that had engineered the danger in the first place. But sitting in her own living room, exhausted, terrified, still feeling in her sternum the phantom vibration of a voice that was not a voice, Ali did not yet have the discernment to separate the true half of that sentence from the false half, and she let Corinne leave that afternoon without either promising to return to the circle or telling her, clearly, that she would not.



"There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death." — Proverbs 14:12

In the gray, sleepless hours after Corinne left, Ali did something she had never once thought to do in two years of blind, grateful devotion: she went looking for the ones who had come before her.

She started with Wren's offhand mention of a grandmother who had left the circle decades earlier, a detail Wren had let slip only once and never repeated, and found, after an evening of careful, anxious searching through old newspaper archives and a genealogy site she barely knew how to use, a name — Loretta Ianelli, dead eleven years now, an obituary that mentioned, in the polite, evasive language small-town papers use for things they don't wish to explain, that she had "struggled in her later years" and passed "after a long illness that few understood," survived by a granddaughter the obituary did not name but whom Ali now felt certain, with a cold, sinking recognition, could only be Wren.

She found two more names that night, both women Corinne had mentioned in passing at different gatherings over the past year as examples of Meridian's success stories — a real estate mogul in one telling, a psychic to minor celebrities in another — and found, instead of continued success, a foreclosure notice for one and, for the other, a three-year-old missing-persons flyer, never updated, the woman's photograph fading in the low resolution of an old community forum post, last seen leaving a going-away gathering thrown, the post noted, by "friends from her spiritual community," her car found abandoned off a rural highway two counties over, her fate never resolved, her case, as far as Ali could tell from an hour of increasingly frantic searching, quietly closed for lack of leads.

She sat back from her laptop somewhere near two in the morning, her hands cold, and understood that she was looking, for the first time with open eyes, at the actual shape of what Meridian had always been beneath the wealth and the velvet and the promises of family: not a fellowship that lifted its members, but a harvest that used them, decade after decade, generation after generation of hungry, grieving women each convinced she was the exception, each discovering, too late, that she had never once been anything but a resource with a shelf life. Foreclosure. Illness no one understood. A car abandoned on a rural highway. She thought of Harold's easy laugh, of Patrice's meaningful glances, of thirty confident, wealthy people applauding softly around a brass circle while she bled onto an ancient page, and she understood, with a grief too large to fully hold, that she had not joined a family at all. She had joined a ledger, and ledgers, when an entry stops paying out, simply get closed.



"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness." — Ephesians 6:12

The following weeks became, for Ali, a kind of siege she fought largely alone, in an apartment that no longer felt like a sanctuary at any hour of the day.

The manifestations did not wait politely for 3:11 anymore. She heard her name whispered from empty rooms in the middle of the afternoon now, caught the mirror-face reflected behind her own even in broad daylight with every light in the apartment burning, found small, deliberate disturbances waiting for her when she came home — the Sanctum's black cloth torn from its table and left in a heap on the floor, every candle in the room burned down to nothing though she had lit none of them that day, the leather grimoire Corinne had gifted her open to a page Ali did not remember ever having read, the ink on it wet, as though something had been writing in her own handwriting only moments before she walked in.

Her clients began to notice the toll even through a phone screen, several of them gently, worriedly suggesting she take some time off; her follower count, for the first time in two years, began a slow, steady decline as her posts grew sparser and stranger, the confident, ethereal Selene of a year earlier replaced by a visibly exhausted woman whose smile, in every video, no longer reached anywhere near her eyes. Preston Cole called twice to ask, in his brisk, unbothered way, whether she wanted to discuss "restructuring given the change in your public profile," a euphemism, she understood immediately, for the fact that her income, too, had begun to notice her withdrawal.

She stopped answering Wren's texts as well, not out of anger, but out of a bone-deep exhaustion that had no capacity left for anyone, even the one person in that world who had, in her own guarded

way, tried more than once to warn her honestly. It was Wren, in the end, who showed up at Ali's door near the end of that terrible stretch, on a night Ali had spent three straight hours sitting fully dressed on her living room floor, too frightened to turn off the lights and too exhausted to keep them on, watching the black cloth she'd re-hung over the Sanctum mirror ripple faintly, as though something behind it were testing the fabric with an unseen hand.

"You look like you're dying," Wren said, when Ali finally opened the door, and there was no cool detachment left in her voice at all, only a rawness Ali had never once heard from her in over a year of Tuesday nights.

"I think I might be," Ali said honestly.

Wren stood in the doorway for a long moment, visibly wrestling with something, and when she finally spoke, her voice had dropped low, urgent, the voice of someone saying a thing she had decided, in that instant, was worth whatever it would cost her to say it. "There's a man," she said. "An old pastor, if you can believe I'm the one telling you this. A friend of my grandmother's, before she died. My grandmother left the circle, decades ago — I never told you that, I never tell anyone that — and this man was the one who helped her do it and survive it. I don't know if what he has is real, Ali. I don't know if any of the things we were taught are real in the way we were taught them. I only know that I've spent five years wishing I'd had the courage to call him myself, and I am done watching you get further into this than I ever let myself go." She pressed a small folded slip of paper into Ali's hand, a phone number in unfamiliar handwriting, and stepped back before Ali could fully process what was happening. "Call him. Or don't. But I couldn't keep standing at that circle's edge watching what it's doing to you and say nothing, not this time."



"The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world." — Revelation 12:9

Ali stood in her doorway long after Wren's car had pulled away, holding the small folded paper in a hand that had not fully stopped shaking in over two weeks, and understood, with a clarity that finally reached all the way down to the foundation of her, exactly what she had become.

Not a queen of anything. Not gifted, not chosen, not a door standing open to unlimited power, all the words she had spent two years wearing like a crown she'd finally, finally earned. She had been, from the very first candlelit evening in the back of a shop that smelled like sandalwood, a resource — courted the way a con artist courts a lonely widow, flattered the way a predator flatters anyone whose hunger makes them easy to read, used to draw other hungry, grieving women into the same trap,

discarded in cold, liability-conscious phone calls the exact moment her usefulness became a liability of its own. Jasmine Farrow was dead. Ali's own body had been shaking for weeks. And the kingdom that had promised her a family that actually delivers had delivered, in the end, exactly one thing consistently, across two full years: whatever it wanted, whenever it wanted it, at whatever cost to her it required.

She thought of the thing's voice, vibrating up through her sternum in the dark: you are ours, you signed it in your own blood, we do not release what we have paid for. She thought of Corinne's forty years of practiced, weary honesty, offering deeper submission as the only alternative to destruction. She thought of a leather-bound book, somewhere in a basement forty minutes outside town, holding her handprint alongside decades of others — women, she understood now with a horror that arrived far too late, who had each once believed, as fervently as she had, that they were being chosen rather than consumed.

She was not a bride of anything in that kingdom. She had never been anything to it but useful, and now, bleeding out in ways no one could see, she was simply becoming less useful by the day — and creatures that operate on usefulness alone, she understood, standing alone in her doorway at nearly midnight with a stranger's handwritten phone number pressed into her palm, do not keep what has stopped serving them. They discard it. Or worse.

She closed the door, walked back into her living room, and for the first time in two years, she did not reach for a candle, or a card, or a working meant to bend some corner of the world back into a shape she could bear. She sat down at her kitchen table with Wren's little folded paper in front of her, and beside it, retrieved at last from its drawer and left sitting in open, unhidden view for the first time since she was a teenager, her grandmother's small wooden cross.

She did not call the number that night. She was not ready yet, not fully, and some old, stubborn pride in her — the same pride that had carried a six-year-old through a ditch and a nine-year-old through a locked silence and a fifteen-year-old through an empty fellowship hall — was not yet willing to admit, out loud, to a stranger, exactly how far she had fallen and exactly how badly she needed someone to reach down and pull her out.

But she picked up the cross, and held it, and did not put it away again. And somewhere underneath the terror that had not left her chest in weeks, something else had begun, faintly, to stir — something that did not demand, did not threaten, did not vibrate up through her ribs like a struck bell, but simply waited, the way it had always waited, patient beyond every version of patience Ali had ever known, for a door she had spent fourteen years keeping closed to finally, finally begin to open from the inside.

Chapter 8 – Haunted

"You scare me with dreams and terrify me with visions, so that I would rather be strangled, rather die than have this body." — Job 7:14–15

By the second week of May, Ali Gibson had not had a full night of unbroken sleep in twenty-six days.

She knew the number precisely because she had started counting, the way a prisoner scratches marks into a cell wall, a small private ritual that had become one of the only things in her life that still felt entirely within her own control. Twenty-six days since the thing at the foot of her bed had risen out of the dark and told her, in a voice that lived behind her sternum rather than in her ears, that she belonged to it. Twenty-six days of 3:11, of cold patches of air, of a bathroom mirror she now avoided except in the barest necessary seconds, applying concealer to bruise-dark circles that no longer faded no matter how much sleep she occasionally managed to steal in fifteen- and twenty-minute increments, curled on her couch with every lamp in the apartment burning.

The exhaustion had stopped feeling like tiredness somewhere around day fourteen and started feeling like something closer to drowning — a heaviness behind her eyes that never fully lifted, a fog that sat over her thinking the way fog sits over a valley, thick enough that she sometimes found herself standing in the middle of her own kitchen with no memory of having walked there, no memory of what she'd meant to do once she arrived. She had missed two client sessions entirely, not canceled, simply forgotten, waking from a fifteen-minute doze on her couch to three increasingly concerned text messages and the sick, disorienting understanding that an hour and a half of her life had simply gone missing, swallowed whole by a sleep so thin and broken it left no trace of itself behind.

She had stopped filming videos altogether. The follower count that had once been the single most reliable source of validation in her adult life sat frozen, then slowly declining, and Ali found she could no longer make herself care about the numbers the way she once had — a fact that would have seemed, eight months earlier, like an impossible kind of freedom, and now simply felt like one more thing being taken from her, one more room in the house of her own life going dark.



"I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping." — Psalm 6:6

She tried, in those twenty-six days, nearly everything she could think of.

She tried leaving every light in the apartment burning through the night, an approach that worked, marginally, for exactly two nights before the manifestations simply adjusted, arriving now in full light as readily as they had once preferred the dark — a shift that frightened her more than almost anything else that had happened, because it told her, with a plainness she could no longer argue around, that the darkness had never actually been the source of her fear. The source had never needed darkness at all. It had only ever needed her.

She tried sleeping with the television on, with music playing, with a white-noise application she downloaded at two in the morning during a fit of desperate, tearful searching through her phone, and found that each one worked for a handful of nights before whatever was hunting her sleep learned to work around it, or through it, or — worse, she began to suspect, lying rigid and wide awake at four in the morning listening to ocean sounds loop endlessly from her phone's tinny speaker — simply allowed her the illusion of protection for exactly as long as it amused itself to allow it.

She tried, twice, staying at a hotel across town, telling the front desk clerk some vague story about renovations at her apartment, and both times woke at 3:11 in rooms she had never slept in before, in a city where, statistically, at that exact address, on that exact night, nothing should have followed her at all — and understood, gasping into hotel darkness that smelled of industrial detergent instead of her own home, that whatever haunted her was no longer tethered to a place. It was tethered to her.

She cried more in those twenty-six days than she had cried in the previous ten years combined, an ugly, wracking, entirely undignified grief that arrived at odd hours with no warning — over her scrambled eggs at seven in the morning, in the shower, once, humiliatingly, in the parking lot of a grocery store, sitting in her car for forty minutes before she trusted herself to walk inside without falling apart in front of strangers. She did not fully understand, in the moment, everything the tears were for. Some of it was fear, plain and animal. But some deeper current underneath the fear, she would only understand much later, was grief for an entire life — for the woman who had once believed, with total, uncomplicated sincerity, that a candle shop and a kind stranger's warm hands had finally, finally answered a prayer she'd stopped believing anyone was listening to.



"Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." — 1 Peter 5:8

The visions, when she allowed herself to catalogue them honestly, no longer arrived as isolated, deniable incidents. They arrived in a steady, escalating procession, each one building on the last, as

though whatever tormented her had grown bored of subtlety and had decided, in the wake of her small rebellion, to simply overwhelm her instead.

She saw, one evening in the second week of May, her own shadow move independently of her body while she stood perfectly still at her kitchen counter — not a trick of flickering light, not a candle's uneven flame, because she had stopped burning candles at all by then, only the flat, even glow of an overhead fixture, and still her shadow on the wall beside her had turned its head, slow and deliberate, to look at her directly, before snapping back into ordinary alignment the instant she gasped and spun to face it.

She heard, another night, what sounded unmistakably like a child crying somewhere in her apartment — not the ambient, murmuring conversation she'd grown almost used to, but a small, specific, heartbreaking sound that pulled at every protective instinct she had, drawing her half out of bed before some older, wiser fear stopped her hand on the doorknob, some instinct warning her that nothing in this apartment that sounded like a frightened child was actually a frightened child, and that opening that door to comfort it would be the single worst decision of her life. She lay back down and pressed a pillow over her own ears, and the crying continued for the better part of an hour, patient, relentless, occasionally rising in pitch to something that sounded, for one horrifying stretch near dawn, almost like it was calling her name.

She woke twice that same week with thin, precise scratches across her forearms, three parallel lines each time, too shallow to require anything beyond antiseptic and too deliberate, too evenly spaced, to have come from her own restless hands in sleep — marks that made her think, with a lurch of nausea, of the thin red lines she had once carved into her own thigh at fourteen, a private geography of pain she had not revisited in fifteen years and had not, until she stood in her bathroom staring at these new marks, understood how closely whatever tormented her now had studied the map of her oldest wounds, how precisely it knew exactly which scars to echo back to her.

There was one vision, worse than the others, that she never told anyone about at all, not Wren, not Diane, not even, months later, Pastor Mercer himself, though she would eventually tell him nearly everything else. It came on a Sunday afternoon, the most ordinary hour of the most ordinary day, sunlight pouring warm and yellow through her living room windows, and she was standing at her kitchen sink washing a single coffee cup when the water running over her hands turned, for three full seconds, the deep, unmistakable red of blood — warm, thick, coating her fingers and pooling faintly pink where it met the white porcelain of the sink — before returning, as abruptly as it had changed, to ordinary clear water, her hands beneath it clean and unmarked, no smell, no residue, nothing at all to prove to her own racing heart that she had not simply imagined the entire thing. She stood at that sink for twenty minutes afterward, running the water over her hands again and again, watching it stay stubbornly, mockingly clear, and understood that the vision had not been meant to frighten her in any

ordinary sense. It had been meant to show her, plainly, in a language even her exhausted mind could not misread, exactly what she had signed two years earlier in a basement forty minutes outside town, and exactly what continued to be owed.

She began, by the third week, to see figures in her peripheral vision constantly, not merely at mirrors now but everywhere — standing at the end of grocery store aisles, gone the instant she turned; seated in the empty passenger seat of her car reflected in the rearview mirror, gone the instant she checked directly; once, unmistakably, standing at the foot of her bed in full daylight while she lay paralyzed, unable to move a single muscle despite being, as far as she could tell, entirely awake, a phenomenon she would later learn had a clinical name, sleep paralysis, and would never fully believe, whatever the textbooks called it, was only that.



"Physicians of no value are you all. Oh that you would keep silent, and it would be your wisdom!" — Job 13:4–5

She finally went to see a doctor in the third week, mostly because Beth, calling to check on her out of what remained of genuine affection despite everything, had insisted with such worried persistence that Ali finally agreed simply to end the conversation.

Dr. Anika Patel was young, brisk, and kind in the efficient, slightly rushed way of a general practitioner working through a fully booked Tuesday, and she listened to Ali's carefully sanitized account — sleep disturbances, unexplained tremor, some anxiety, she said, some scratches she couldn't quite account for, leaving out entirely the words that would have gotten her a very different kind of referral — with a patience that made Ali, for one disorienting moment, almost weep with gratitude simply for being taken seriously by someone who wanted nothing from her at all.

The bloodwork came back unremarkable. Thyroid normal. Vitamin levels normal, if slightly low on D and B12, easily explained by a woman who hadn't seen genuine sunlight in a month. An EKG for the tremor and the racing heart she reported turned up nothing structurally wrong, and Dr. Patel, reviewing it all with a small furrow between her brows that told Ali more than her words did, finally set down her folder and looked at her directly.

"Physically, I'm not finding anything that explains what you're describing," she said. "Which doesn't mean nothing is happening to you, Ms. Gibson — it means whatever is happening isn't showing up in bloodwork. I'd like to refer you to someone who specializes in trauma and severe anxiety. Sometimes the body keeps recreating a threat long after the actual threat has passed, especially under

sustained stress. It's not a character flaw. It's a nervous system that's been asked to survive too much for too long."

Ali took the referral card and thanked her, and did not, in the end, ever call the number on it — not out of doubt that trauma could do exactly what Dr. Patel described, but out of a colder, more specific certainty that no therapist in the county, however skilled, was equipped to treat a patient whose scratches reappeared in patterns too deliberate for her own sleeping hands, whose shadow had turned its head on a kitchen wall, whose car had refused, with no mechanical cause anyone could find, to start on the one night she'd tried to flee. She kept the card anyway, tucked into the same jacket pocket as Wren's folded scrap of paper, two different kinds of help she was not yet brave enough to ask for, riding together against her hip through the worst month of her life.



"When an unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and finding none... Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there." — Luke 11:24–26

She thought often, during those weeks, of a passage she remembered only in fragments from her childhood Sunday school years — a man living among tombs, chained and shackled by frightened townspeople who could not otherwise contain him, crying out and cutting himself with stones, possessed by something that called itself Legion, for we are many. She had not thought of that story in over a decade, had certainly never expected to think of it again, and yet it surfaced now, unbidden, with a clarity that frightened her nearly as much as the visions themselves, because for the first time in her life she understood, in her own body, exactly what that ancient story had been describing — not metaphor, not primitive superstition dressed up as scripture, but a plain, clinical account of what it actually felt like to be inhabited by something that wanted her isolated, wanted her cutting, wanted her living, functionally, among the tombs of her own life while everyone who might have helped her stood at a frightened distance.

She had isolated herself as thoroughly as any chained man among any tombs. Kayla, gone. Aunt Carol, gone. Marcus, gone. Her coworkers, drifting further every week. Even Meridian, the family that had promised to deliver everything, had reduced itself to Wren's occasional worried text and Corinne's cold, self-protective silence since the confrontation on Ali's couch. She sat some nights on her bathroom floor with her back against the tub, knees drawn to her chest, and found her right hand drifting, almost without her permission, toward the drawer where an old disposable razor still sat among ordinary toiletries, a compulsion she had not felt with this particular sharp, insistent pull since she was fourteen years old — and she would sit there, shaking, for as long as it took the pull to pass,

sometimes minutes, once nearly an hour, understanding with a distant, exhausted horror that whatever tormented her wanted this specifically, wanted her hurting herself by her own hand rather than its own, wanted a return to old patterns of self-destruction it had clearly studied as carefully as it had studied every other wound in her.

She did not cut. She would hold onto that fact, in the difficult months that followed, as one of the only things she had gotten right during the worst stretch of her life — not because the pull hadn't been real, but because some small, stubborn ember of the six-year-old who had once learned to survive a ditch behind a trailer had refused, even at the very bottom of the well, to hand over that particular victory.



"I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath... He has walled me about so that I cannot escape; he has made my chains heavy." — Lamentations 3:1, 7

She tried, in the fourth week, to simply leave.

It was not a well-considered plan. It was the desperate, animal logic of a woman who had run out of every other idea, the same logic that had once carried an eighteen-year-old out of a trailer at the end of Miller's Creek Road with four hundred dollars and a duffel bag: if the danger has a location, remove yourself from the location. She packed a bag at two in the morning, hands shaking so badly she left half of what she needed behind, and got as far as her car in the apartment complex's parking lot before the engine, which had started reliably every single day for three years, simply refused to turn over — not a dead battery, the mechanic would tell her two days later, utterly baffled, nothing wrong with it at all that he could find or explain, and yet it had sat dead in that parking lot for the twenty minutes Ali spent sobbing and turning the key before she finally gave up and walked back inside.

She tried again four days later, on foot this time, no destination in mind beyond simply moving, simply putting distance between herself and the apartment that no longer felt like a sanctuary at any hour — and made it three blocks before a wave of vertigo so total dropped her to her knees on the sidewalk, the entire visible world tilting and doubling in a way that had nothing to do with exhaustion alone, accompanied by a pressure behind her eyes and a ringing in her ears that did not fully clear for nearly an hour, long after she had crawled, humiliated, to a bus stop bench to wait it out under the concerned, uncertain glances of strangers who clearly did not know whether to call an ambulance or simply look away.

She understood, by the end of that fourth week, with a completeness that finally silenced every remaining argument she might have made to herself, that Corinne had told her something true, wrapped

inside all the self-serving deception: there really was no clean exit. She was not merely frightened. She was, in some fundamental sense she still lacked the full vocabulary to describe, trapped — walled in, exactly as an old, half-remembered verse had once put it, chains made heavy by hands that had no interest whatsoever in ever setting her free simply because she had grown tired of carrying them.



"A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity." — Proverbs 17:17

Diane came to see her twice during that fourth week, unannounced both times, and both visits left Ali more unsettled than comforted, though not for any lack of sincerity on Diane's part.

The first time, Diane simply held her while Ali cried in the doorway, unable to form a coherent sentence, and made her tea in the familiar, practiced way from two years earlier, and said almost nothing at all beyond you're safe here for a few minutes, sweetheart, which Ali understood, even through her exhaustion, to be the first time in months anyone from that world had told her something that sounded like comfort rather than instruction.

The second visit, four days later, Diane arrived with something different in her face — a resolve Ali hadn't seen from her before, closer to fear than to the warm, unshakable serenity she'd always projected.

"I need to tell you something I should have told you two years ago," Diane said, sitting across from Ali at the kitchen table, her ringed hands wrapped so tightly around her mug that her knuckles had gone pale. "I never went as deep as Corinne's circle. I told myself, for thirty years, that it was because I preferred the gentler practice, the front-porch version, as she likes to call it. The truth is I went once, when I was younger than you are now, and I saw enough in one single evening to know I never wanted to see it again. I built The Sacred Ember instead. A safe distance from the thing I was afraid of, close enough to still feel important, still feel connected to something bigger than my own small life. I told myself for three decades that made me wise instead of simply frightened." She looked up, and her eyes were wet. "I sent you to Corinne, Ali. I'm the one who told her about you. I saw how hungry you were, and some part of me — some part I am deeply ashamed of — wanted to matter to someone as important as Corinne considered herself, and you were my ticket in. I didn't send you to her because I thought it would help you. I sent you to her because it flattered me that she wanted what I had found."

Ali sat with that confession for a long moment, feeling something that was not quite forgiveness and not quite rage, some third, exhausted thing she didn't have a name for. "Why are you telling me this now?"

"Because Jasmine Farrow is dead," Diane said simply, "and because I have spent thirty years telling myself that staying near the shallow end of something evil made me safe from it, and I don't believe that anymore. I don't know how to get you out of what you're in, sweetheart. I never went deep enough to know the way back out. But I know I can't keep sitting on the shore watching you drown and calling it wisdom." She reached across the table and took Ali's trembling hand, the same gesture from their very first meeting two years earlier, except this time it held nothing practiced in it at all. "If you find a way out of this, I want to know how. Because I think I might need it too, one day, whether I've admitted that to myself yet or not."

Ali did not yet have an answer to give her. But she held onto Diane's hand for a long time after the words stopped, and understood, in the raw, hollowed-out quiet that followed, that even inside a kingdom built entirely on deception, some of the people caught in it were exactly as lost and exactly as frightened as she was — a realization that did nothing to undo the danger she was in, but that softened, slightly, the particular loneliness of believing herself the only one who had ever been foolish enough to fall.



"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?... O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest." — Psalm 22:1–2

There was a night, near the very end of that fourth week, when Ali came closer to the true bottom of herself than she had ever come in twenty-nine years of difficult, wounded living — closer than the ditch, closer than Dale's hand on the doorknob, closer than the counselor's office where a kind, tired woman had once filled out forms that changed nothing, closer even than the night the thing at the foot of her bed had told her, in a voice that lived behind her ribs, exactly what she had become.

She sat on her kitchen floor with her back against the cabinets, the overhead light burning uselessly above her, and found herself, for the first time since she was a teenager staring at a razor blade with something like relief in her chest, genuinely, seriously considering whether continuing to exist inside a body this thoroughly hunted was a burden she still had the strength to keep carrying. It was not, she would understand much later, a decision so much as an absence — an absence of any remaining reason to keep fighting, a total, bottomless exhaustion that had stopped distinguishing between wanting to escape the haunting and wanting to escape everything, her whole aching, frightened, thoroughly used-up self along with it.

She did not act on it. She would spend a long time afterward unable to fully explain why, beyond a single, small, insistent fact that kept surfacing through the fog every time she tried to let it go entirely:

somewhere in her jacket pocket, folded and re-folded so many times the creases had gone soft, sat a scrap of paper with a stranger's phone number written on it in Wren's unfamiliar handwriting, and some stubborn, unexamined part of her kept reaching for that scrap of paper the way a drowning person reaches for anything at all that floats, not because she believed it would save her, but because she had, apparently, some small remaining reserve of will that refused to go under without at least trying every door still technically open to her.

She did not call that night. Her hands shook too badly to hold the phone steady, and some old, ingrained shame — the same shame that had kept a nine-year-old silent for two years, the same shame that had kept a fifteen-year-old from ever telling Kyle the youth pastor what she'd actually meant by her unanswered prayer — told her that calling a stranger at three in the morning to say I think something evil lives inside my apartment and I don't know how to make it leave was the kind of sentence that got a person locked away, not helped.

But she did not throw the paper away either. She sat with it in her lap until the gray, indifferent light of dawn came up outside her kitchen window, and for the first time in twenty-nine years, in the total absence of anything else left to try, she found herself speaking out loud into the empty room — not to the presence that had haunted her for months, not to Diane or Corinne or any voice from the last two years, but to the God she had dismissed as silent in an empty fellowship hall at fifteen, using words that came out clumsy and unpracticed, like a language she had once spoken fluently as a small child and had almost, but not entirely, forgotten.

"I don't know if this even reaches you," she said, her voice raw and unfamiliar in the silent kitchen. "I don't know if I have any right left to ask you for anything, after everything I've done, everywhere I've been. But I am so tired. I am so tired, and I don't have anyone else left to ask. If you're there — if you were ever there — I need you to show me. Because I don't think I can survive many more nights like the last twenty-six on my own."



"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." — Matthew 11:28

Nothing answered her audibly. No warm voice filled the kitchen the way the false warmth of a candlelit back room had once filled her with such convincing comfort. No sensation swept over her, no chill lifted, no burden visibly departed.

But something did happen, small and easy to dismiss and yet, looking back, the first thread of an answer she would spend the rest of her life grateful she had not been too exhausted to notice: she fell

asleep, right there at her kitchen table, head resting on her folded arms, for nearly three unbroken hours — the longest, most restful stretch of sleep she had managed in twenty-six days — and she did not wake once at 3:11, because by the time that particular hour arrived, she was already deeply, dreamlessly under, and whatever had claimed dominion over that specific minute of her nights for the better part of a year did not, for reasons she would not understand until much later, manage to reach her at all.

She woke near seven with the worst kink in her neck she'd had in years, sunlight coming in warm and ordinary through her kitchen window, and sat up slowly, disoriented, running her hands over her face, half-convinced the three hours of peace had been some cruel trick her exhausted mind had played on her. But her phone, when she checked it, confirmed the time honestly. Three hours. Unbroken. The first in nearly a month.

It was not deliverance. She understood that much even in the raw, grateful relief of the moment — three hours of sleep was not an exorcism, was not a rescue, did not undo two years of blood signed on an old page in a basement forty minutes outside town. But it was the first evidence in twenty-nine years of desperate, exhausted asking that something, somewhere, might actually have heard her — a small, undeniable crack of light let into a well she had genuinely begun to believe had no bottom at all, let alone any way back up.



"But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me." — 2 Corinthians 12:9

She sat at her kitchen table for a long time after that, the folded scrap of paper with Wren's handwriting smoothed flat in front of her, and thought about the word weakness — a word she had spent two years being taught, in candlelit rooms full of confident, well-dressed people, to despise in herself, to overcome, to transform through sufficient will and sufficient ritual into something that looked, from the outside, like power.

She did not yet know the verse sitting behind that word, would not encounter it directly for a few weeks longer, would not understand until an elderly pastor read it aloud to her in a quiet, unremarkable office how precisely it answered the exact lie she had spent two years building her entire second life upon: that her hunger, her woundedness, her aching need to be chosen, was a flaw to be conquered rather than a door through which an entirely different kind of power had been waiting, all along, to meet her exactly where she was too exhausted to keep pretending otherwise.

She picked up her phone with hands that had finally, for the first time in weeks, stopped shaking quite so badly, and dialed the number on the scrap of paper before she could talk herself out of it again, listening to it ring once, twice, a third time, her heart hammering not with the old, familiar terror of the last month but with something new, something almost unbearably fragile, that she did not yet have a name for and would not recognize, for a while longer still, as the very first stirring of hope.

On the fourth ring, someone picked up.

"Hello," said an old man's voice, unhurried, warm in a way that bore no resemblance at all to the practiced, performative warmth Ali had grown so wary of over the last two years — a voice that simply sounded, plainly and without agenda, glad that the phone had rung. "This is Pastor Elias Mercer speaking. How can I help you?"

Ali opened her mouth, and for a long moment, no words came out at all.

Chapter 9 – A Voice in the Storm

"He said to them, 'Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?' ... And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm." — Mark 4:39–40

"I don't know how to start," Ali finally managed, her voice cracking on the fourth word, sitting alone at her kitchen table with dawn coming up gray and ordinary outside her window, twenty-six sleepless nights compressed into a single trembling breath. "I don't even know what I'm asking you for."

"You don't have to know," said the voice on the other end, unhurried, patient in a way that asked nothing of her in return. "Most people who call this number don't know what they're asking for either, not at first. Just tell me what's true. Start anywhere. I'm not going anywhere."

So Ali started, clumsily, in fragments, the way a person speaks who has spent two years learning to perform confidence and has almost entirely forgotten how to simply tell the truth. She told him about the candle shop, and the black candle guttering sideways in a windowless room, and Tyler's firing, and the money, and the followers, and the basement forty minutes outside town with its brass circle and its bleeding page. She told him about Jasmine Farrow, her voice finally breaking all the way open on the girl's name, and about the thing that had risen at the foot of her bed and told her, in a voice that lived behind her ribs, exactly what she had become. She told him about the twenty-six days, the scratches on

her arms, the blood that had run from her own kitchen faucet for three impossible seconds on an ordinary Sunday afternoon.

Pastor Mercer did not interrupt her once. He did not gasp, or scold, or rush to fill the silences where her voice failed her, the way Kayla once had, the way her aunt Carol had, the way every ordinary person in her old life had eventually flinched from the full weight of what she was carrying. When she finally ran out of words, spent and shaking, the silence on the line held for a long moment before he spoke again, and what he said was not what she expected.

"Thank you for trusting me with that," he said simply. "That took more courage than you probably know. Ali — can I call you Ali? — I want you to hear me say something plainly, before we talk about anything else. What you have just described to me is real. I am not going to spend our first conversation trying to convince you that you imagined any of it, or that grief and exhaustion invented a demon out of ordinary bad luck. I believe you. And because I believe you, I need you to hear the second thing just as plainly: it is not stronger than what I am about to introduce you to, if you're willing to let me."

"I don't — " Ali's voice caught. "I don't think I believe in anything anymore. Not really. Not after everything I've already believed in that turned out to be a lie."

"That's all right," Pastor Mercer said, and she could hear, even through the phone, something that sounded almost like a smile. "Belief isn't the boat, Ali. It's the passenger. You don't have to believe the boat will hold you before you climb in. You just have to be tired enough of drowning to reach for it. Can you come see me? Today, if you're able. I don't think this is a conversation that should wait for a convenient hour, and I don't think you should spend another night in that apartment alone if there's any way to avoid it."



"The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" — Psalm 27:1

The church, when Ali found it two hours later after a drive she made with the radio off and her hands locked at ten and two the entire way, was smaller and plainer than she expected — a modest brick building on the edge of a neighborhood she'd driven past a hundred times without ever once noticing it, a hand-painted sign out front reading Cornerstone Fellowship in letters that had faded unevenly with years of sun, nothing like the manicured, expensive discretion of the estate forty minutes outside town, nothing like the careful, curated aesthetic of The Sacred Ember's crescent moon and star.

Pastor Elias Mercer met her at the door himself, and Ali's first thought, absurdly, was that he looked too ordinary to be the answer to anything — a stooped, silver-haired man well into his seventies, wearing a cardigan despite the warm May morning, moving with the careful deliberateness of a man whose knees had given him trouble for decades. But his eyes, when they found hers, held something she had not encountered in any face across two full years inside Meridian's gilded circle: a total absence of calculation. He was not assessing her value. He was not reading her wound to know exactly where to press. He simply looked at her the way a person looks at someone who has walked a very long way to arrive somewhere, with nothing in his expression but plain, unhurried welcome.

"You made good time," he said, and led her not into a sanctuary but into a small, cluttered office lined with books, where a woman about his own age sat waiting with a pot of coffee already made and a stack of tissues set discreetly on the corner of the desk, as though she had done this exact preparation many times before.

"This is my wife, Ruth," Pastor Mercer said. "She's better at this part than I am, if I'm honest. I do the talking. She does the noticing."

Ruth Mercer took both of Ali's hands in hers, the same gesture Diane had used on that very first Saturday two years earlier, and Ali flinched, involuntarily, bracing for whatever it was this gesture usually preceded — but Ruth simply held her hands for a moment, studying her face with an attention that felt, disorientingly, like being seen without being priced, and said only, "You've been carrying something for a very long time, haven't you, sweetheart. Longer than these last two years. Sit down. You're safe in this room."

Ali sat. She did not know, in that moment, how to explain the strange, vertiginous relief of hearing the words you're safe spoken by someone who was not, in the same breath, asking anything of her in return.



"Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." — 1 John 4:4

"I want to tell you something about myself before we go any further," Pastor Mercer said, once Ruth had settled a mug of coffee into Ali's still-trembling hands, "because I think it might help you trust the rest of what I have to say. Forty-one years ago, before I was ever a pastor, my closest friend from seminary asked me to help her get her sister out of something very similar to what you've just described to me. A group. Wealthy. Discreet. Meeting in a house not so different, I'd guess, from the one you've described, forty minutes from wherever this town has its own version of a respectable front door. Her

sister had been in three years by the time we intervened. I watched, up close, over eighteen months, exactly what it costs to walk a soul back out of that kind of darkness. It is not quick. It is not painless. And it is not, I want to be very clear with you, something I have ever once managed to do in my own strength."

"Did she make it out?" Ali asked. "The sister?"

"She did," Pastor Mercer said. "She's an old woman now, living two states from here, and every single Christmas she calls me to tell me she's still free, because some nights the memory of how close it came to going the other way is still vivid enough that she needs to hear her own voice say it out loud." He leaned forward slightly, his old eyes steady on Ali's. "Her name was Loretta. I believe you may have crossed paths, at some distance, with her granddaughter."

Ali's breath caught. "Wren."

"Wren," Pastor Mercer confirmed, something gentle and sad moving across his face. "Loretta asked me, years ago, to keep an eye out, in whatever quiet way an old man can, for the day her granddaughter might need the same door held open for her that I once held open for Loretta. I did not expect that door to open first for a young woman named Ali Gibson. But the Lord rarely consults my expectations before He acts, and I have learned, across forty years of this work, to simply be grateful when the door opens at all, however it happens to open."

Ali sat with that revelation for a long moment, feeling something in her chest shift — not trust, not yet, not fully, but the first loosening of a suspicion she had not even fully realized she was carrying, the reflexive, well-earned wariness of a woman who had been courted and flattered and used by every single person who had ever told her, with total conviction, that they understood exactly what she needed.

"Why isn't he afraid of me?" she asked, quiet, almost to herself. "Everyone else who's found out what I've been part of — they get this look. Even the people who love me. Even Diane, some days. You don't have it. Ruth doesn't have it."

"Because greater is He who is in us than he who is in the world," Ruth said simply, from her chair by the window, before her husband could answer. "That's not a nice phrase we cross-stitch onto pillows, honey. It's the plain, structural truth this whole conversation stands on. We are not afraid of what's attached itself to you because we know, without any doubt at all, who is stronger. That's not bravery. It's just arithmetic."



"How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! ... You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high.'" — Isaiah 14:12–13

Pastor Mercer spent the better part of an hour, unhurried, walking Ali through the architecture of the lie she had spent two years living inside, and what struck her most, listening, was how little of what he said required her to first accept anything she wasn't already prepared to believe. He did not ask her to take a leap of faith before explaining anything. He simply named, one after another, the exact promises Diane and Corinne and Meridian's whole gilded circle had made her, and set beside each one a truth so old it predated every candle she had ever lit.

"They told you that you were chosen," he said. "That you had a gift no one else had, that you'd finally been seen for who you really were. That is the very first lie, Ali, the one every false light tells, because it is the one every hungry heart wants most badly to hear. The being you signed your name to two years ago was not created to love you. Scripture tells us plainly what he was before he ever became what he is — a created being, magnificent once, who looked at his own reflection and decided he preferred worship to service. I will exalt my throne above the stars of God, he said, in the oldest account we have of his fall. That is not a being capable of choosing you, Ali, in the way you have spent your whole life aching to be chosen. He does not have love in him to give. He has only ever had appetite, dressed up, generation after generation, in whatever costume a particular soul finds most convincing. For you, it was a warm, grieving-widow's welcome in a candle shop. For someone else, it might be ambition, or lust, or the simple promise of being right about everything, always. The costume changes. The appetite underneath it never does."

"They told me it was the price of enlightenment," Ali said. "The fear. The visions. They said everyone who goes deep enough pays some version of it."

"They told you a partial truth wrapped around a total lie," Pastor Mercer said. "It is true that you are paying a price. It has simply never been enlightenment you were buying. You were paying rent, Ali, on a property you never should have signed a lease on in the first place, to a landlord who has no intention of ever letting the lease lapse voluntarily. That is not spiritual growth. That is captivity being sold to you, quite literally, at premium prices, by people who profit — in money, in standing, in whatever currency your suffering could be converted into — from keeping you exactly where you are."

Ali felt something in her chest crack further open, a grief so large it briefly stole her breath. "Then why did any of it work? The candle. Tyler's firing. The money. If none of it was real, why did it work?"

"Oh, it was real," Pastor Mercer said, and his voice, for the first time, carried something almost like anger — not at her, she understood immediately, but at the thing that had used her. "That is precisely what makes this so dangerous, and precisely what your Corinne and your Diane will never

once explain to you honestly. Real power was extended to you. Real results followed real workings. Scripture never once claims the enemy is powerless, Ali — only that he is a liar, and that his power, wherever it is granted, always eventually serves his purposes rather than yours. He can make a candle gutter sideways in a windowless room. He can arrange a man's expense reports to unravel at a convenient hour. He can even, within limits older and more carefully bounded than he would ever want you to know, cause genuine harm to genuine people who cross a working's path. None of that makes him good, or safe, or worthy of the loyalty you paid him in blood on a page in a basement. It only makes him patient, and thorough, and very, very good at making captivity feel, for a season, exactly like freedom."



"You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." — Genesis 50:20

"I have a question," Ali said, before Pastor Mercer could continue, something rawer and angrier surfacing in her than she'd expected, "and I need you to actually answer it instead of giving me something comforting."

"I'll do my best to give you the truth," he said. "Comfort isn't always the same thing, and I'd rather fail you honestly than succeed at comforting you with something hollow."

"Where was God when I was nine years old?" The words came out sharper than she intended, years of buried fury finally finding a target that wasn't afraid to stand still and receive it. "Where was He when Dale Whitfield came into my room three times and told me no one would believe me if I said anything? I asked Him that exact question when I was fifteen, in a church not so different from this one, and I got silence. Actual, total silence. That's the God you're asking me to run back to. The one who was apparently too busy to stop a grown man from doing that to a little girl."

Pastor Mercer did not flinch, did not offer her a quick verse to paper over the question, did not tell her, as Kyle the youth pastor once effectively had, that all things simply work together for good as though that settled anything for a wounded fifteen-year-old. He was quiet for a long moment, his old eyes wet, and when he finally spoke, his voice had gone rough.

"I don't know," he said. "I want to be honest with you before anything else, Ali, because you have had two years of people telling you comfortable lies with total confidence, and I will not be one more voice doing that to you. I do not know why God allows what He allows. I have buried a grandson. I have sat with mothers of murdered children and had absolutely nothing wise to say to them, only my presence and my tears and my refusal to leave the room. Scripture does not promise us an explanation

for suffering that will satisfy us the way a math proof satisfies us. It promises us something different, and I think, if I'm honest, harder to accept: that He was there. Not absent. Not indifferent. There, grieving what was done to you with a grief you cannot yet imagine, the same way He grieved outside a tomb He was about to walk into and undo, weeping, Scripture tells us, even knowing He was seconds from raising Lazarus back to life. Your suffering was not His will for you, Ali. It was the will of a broken man exploiting a broken world, in a world God has allowed, for reasons bound up with the very same freedom that let you walk willingly into a basement two years ago, to hold real consequence and real danger. But I will tell you what I do know, because I have watched it with my own eyes for forty years: He does not waste what evil intends for harm. Joseph said it to the brothers who sold him into slavery — you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good. Not that the evil was good. Never that. Only that nothing you have suffered, not the ditch, not Dale's hands, not two years in a basement, is outside what He can still, somehow, redeem into something that saves other women exactly like you."

Ali sat with that answer for a long time, tears falling freely now, and found, to her own surprise, that she believed it more than she had believed any of Kyle's easy assurances at fifteen — not because it resolved her anger, but because it did not ask her to pretend the anger was unreasonable in the first place.



"For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control." — 2 Timothy 1:7

"I want to say something to you now," Pastor Mercer said, setting down his coffee, his old hands folding together with a quiet deliberateness that told Ali, before he even spoke, that he had arrived at the center of whatever he had been building toward for the last hour, "and I want you to hear all of it before you decide what to do with any part of it."

Ali braced herself, some old, exhausted instinct expecting a sermon, a demand, one more voice asking something of her in exchange for its help.

"You are fighting a battle you were never meant to fight alone," he said, his voice gentle but unwavering, holding her eyes the entire time. "Every single thing that has happened to you these past two years — the hunger that sent you looking, the loneliness that made you easy to flatter, the fear that has kept you from sleeping in your own bed — every bit of it has been the predictable result of a devil who found an open door and walked through it, the way he always does, the way he has done to hungry, grieving, wounded people since the very first garden. But I need you to hear this clearly, Ali, because I don't think anyone has ever said it to you plainly in your whole life: the devil does not love

you. He never did. You are not his queen, and you were never his bride, whatever ugly, mocking word he used against you the night he rose at the foot of your bed. You are, to him, exactly what you are to any predator — prey, and disposable prey at that, valuable only for exactly as long as you keep producing what he wants from you, and worth nothing at all, worth being thrown away entirely, the moment you stop. That is what happened to Jasmine Farrow. That is what very nearly happened to you, twenty-six sleepless nights into a siege you had no way of winning by yourself."

He paused, letting the words settle, and Ali felt tears sliding down her face without any performance in them at all, the raw, undignified kind she had cried alone in her kitchen for weeks now finally, for the first time, witnessed by someone who was not afraid of them.

"But Jesus," Pastor Mercer said, and something in his voice changed entirely on the name, warmed and steadied at once, "Jesus Christ died because He loves you. Not because you were useful to Him. Not because your following could be leveraged, or your gift monetized, or your loyalty extracted at the price of your own safety. He went to a cross two thousand years ago for a woman named Ali Gibson whom He had already seen, in full, every wound and every wrong turn and every basement in every county in this world she would ever walk into — and He decided, before you ever existed to disappoint or impress Him, that you were worth dying for anyway. Colossians tells us He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Not someday, Ali. Not after you've cleaned yourself up enough to deserve the offer. Already accomplished, two thousand years ago, waiting for you to simply reach out and take hold of what was already paid for in full."

Ali laughed — a short, broken, disbelieving sound that surprised her as much as it seemed to surprise no one else in the room, Ruth watching her with the same patient, unoffended calm as her husband. "That's the simplest answer in the world," Ali said, wiping at her face, some old defensive reflex rising even through the tears. "Two years of blood and basements and a dead nineteen-year-old girl, and the fix is just — believe in Jesus and it all goes away?"

"No," Pastor Mercer said, without a trace of offense at her laughter, as though he had heard this exact response many times before and had made his peace with it decades ago. "The fix is not simple, and I never said it goes away. What I said is that you would not fight the rest of this battle alone. There is a great deal of hard, painful, unglamorous work still ahead of you, Ali, whatever you decide today — renouncing what you signed, destroying what you've built your altar around, walking through nights that may still be difficult for a long while yet even after the decision is made. I am not selling you an easy fix. I have watched too many young women like you to believe in easy fixes. I am telling you that you do not have to walk through that hard work owned by something that has only ever wanted to use you up. You can walk through it belonging, instead, to Someone who already proved, on a Roman cross, exactly how far His love for you was willing to go."



"Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil." — Ephesians 6:11

Ali did not say the words that afternoon. She would think about that failure for weeks afterward, turning it over with a regret she couldn't quite name — the sense that she had stood at an open door and, for reasons even she did not fully understand, stepped back from it rather than through it.

She let Pastor Mercer pray over her instead, his weathered hand resting light as a leaf on her bowed head while Ruth held both her hands again, and something in the words he spoke — plain, unadorned, entirely unlike the ceremonial cadences of the basement circle, containing no theatrics, no candles, no chalice, nothing but a tired old man asking, in the plainest language imaginable, for God to stand between Ali Gibson and whatever hunted her — settled over the room with a stillness she had not felt in longer than she could remember. She did not feel the electric, performative thrill she'd once felt at her own first working. She felt, instead, something closer to what she imagined a exhausted swimmer might feel finally finding a shallow place to stand after hours fighting open water — not triumph, not rescue exactly, but the first solid ground beneath feet that had forgotten what solid ground felt like.

Before she left, Ruth pressed a small, worn Bible into her hands — "Not to convert you today, sweetheart, just to have. Read the Gospel of John if you don't know where else to start. It was written, the very last verse tells you, so that you would believe" — and Pastor Mercer gave her his own cell number, along with the number of two women from his congregation, Marilyn and Josephine, both of whom, he told her gently, had walked out of their own dark rooms years earlier and had asked him, more than once, to be given exactly this kind of call should another woman ever need it. "You are not the first," he told her at the door, holding both her hands one final time, "and by God's mercy, you will not be the last. But you do not have to decide everything today. You only have to decide whether you're willing to keep walking toward the door instead of away from it. That's all faith ever asks of anyone, at the very beginning. Just the next step."



"We love because he first loved us." — 1 John 4:19

Before Ali left, Ruth made one phone call, and twenty minutes later a woman named Marilyn arrived at the church office still in her work clothes, having left, she explained cheerfully, right in the

middle of an afternoon shift at the pharmacy the moment Ruth called. She was perhaps fifty, solidly built, with laugh lines that seemed at odds with the story she told Ali over a second pot of coffee — nine years inside a different circle, two states away, in her twenties, before Pastor Mercer's predecessor had walked her out of it much the way Ali was now being walked out of hers.

"I want you to look at me," Marilyn said, taking Ali's hands the way Ruth had, the same gesture that had once been a coven's opening move and was, apparently, simply what free women did with their hands when they wanted someone frightened to feel less alone. "Nine years, honey. I did things I still can't fully make myself say out loud, even now, even to Ruth, even in confession. And I am standing in front of you today married to a good man, mother to three children who have no idea their mother once knelt in a circle like the one you're describing, running a normal life with a normal job and a normal, unremarkable kind of peace I did not think was possible for someone like me. It was not fast. It was not easy. There were nights in the first year I thought the leaving might actually kill me faster than the staying would have. But I promise you, on everything I have, that the other side of this is real, and that you are not the first woman in this room who once believed she had gone too far to ever come back."

Ali left that meeting with three phone numbers now instead of one, a small worn Bible on her passenger seat, and the strange, unfamiliar sensation of having been surrounded, for one single afternoon, by people who wanted absolutely nothing from her except her survival — no client fee, no follower count, no blood on a page, nothing at all beyond the plain, uncomplicated hope that she might someday sit exactly where Marilyn was sitting, telling some other frightened, hunted young woman that the other side of the leaving was real.



"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy." — John 10:10

She drove home in the fading gold light of early evening with Ruth's small Bible on the passenger seat and a strange, fragile lightness in her chest that she did not yet trust enough to call hope, and for the first three hours after she walked back through her own front door, that lightness held.

It did not hold past midnight.

She woke at 3:11 to a cold so absolute it felt like drowning in ice water, and the voice that filled her bedroom this time did not bother with intimacy, did not call her Mine in a tone that could ever again be mistaken for tenderness. It arrived instead with a fury that shook the windowpanes, an old man's God cannot have you, it said, vibrating up through her sternum with a violence that left her ears ringing long after the words stopped, you crawled to him and he will not keep his promise, no one ever

keeps their promise to you, your own mother didn't, your own God didn't at fifteen in that empty room, and he will not either, you will come back to us the way you always come back to what actually delivers, and when you do, the door will not open as easily as it did the first time.

Ali lay rigid in the dark, every muscle locked, and found, to her own quiet astonishment, that underneath the terror — real, total, exactly as consuming as it had ever been — something small and stubborn had taken root that had not been there twenty-six days earlier. She did not fight the fear with a working, did not reach for a candle or a card or any ritual her hands still half-remembered by muscle memory alone. She reached instead, blindly, in the dark, for the small worn Bible Ruth had pressed into her hands that afternoon, and held it against her chest the way she had once held her grandmother's cross, and whispered, her voice shaking but no longer entirely alone in the room, the only words she could remember clearly enough to say.

"Jesus," she said. Just the name. Nothing more elegant than that, no practiced incantation, no ceremony at all. "Jesus. Please."

The pressure in the room did not vanish. But it drew back, an inch, a foot, enough that Ali could breathe again, enough that she understood, gasping in the dark with a stranger's Bible clutched to her chest, that she had just witnessed the very first proof, however small, however incomplete, that Pastor Mercer had told her the truth: that whatever had built its throne inside her bedroom for the better part of a year was not, in fact, the strongest thing in the room. It had simply been, until that night, the only thing she had ever thought to call on.

She did not sleep again before dawn. But for the first time in twenty-seven nights, she was not entirely certain, lying wide awake and trembling in the gray predawn light, that she was fighting alone.

Chapter 10 – The Battle for a Soul

"And he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the LORD said to Satan, 'The LORD rebuke you, O Satan!'" — Zechariah 3:1–2

The retaliation, when it came, did not arrive through the bedroom door at 3:11. It arrived, that week, through the ordinary machinery of Ali's daylight life, and that was, in its own way, more frightening than any shape at the foot of her bed, because it proved that Meridian's reach had never been confined to darkness at all.

Preston Cole called on Monday morning, his usual brisk unbothered tone replaced by something colder, to inform her that "certain irregularities" had been flagged in her account and that, pending a review, her funds would be frozen — a euphemism, she understood immediately, for a message sent through the one language Meridian trusted more than any spell: money. Two of her longest-standing clients canceled their standing sessions within the same week, both citing vague, unconvincing reasons, both of them women Ali knew for a fact were close with Patrice. Her landlord, a man she had paid on time without incident for three years, left a curt note about a lease violation that did not exist, the kind of manufactured pretext a person only bothers inventing when someone has asked them, quietly and with sufficient incentive, to invent it.

None of it was supernatural. That was, Pastor Mercer told her gently when she called him in tears on Tuesday night, precisely the point. "They want you to see how many ordinary doors they can still close on you," he said, "so you'll conclude the spiritual ones are the only ones worth keeping open. Don't mistake influence for omnipotence, Ali. They are frightening you with the very real, very earthly power wealthy, connected people always have over someone with less of both. That is intimidation. It is not proof that God has abandoned you to it."

Ali sat with her frozen bank statement open on her laptop, the numbers that had once represented the single most reassuring evidence of her worth in this world, and found, to her own surprise, that the fear did not have quite the same grip on her that it would have had eight months earlier. She had spent two years believing money was the proof that she mattered. She was beginning, slowly, painfully, to suspect it had never been proof of anything at all beyond how thoroughly a person could be purchased once she'd been taught to need purchasing.



"Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail." — Luke 22:31–32

Wren went silent on Wednesday, and by Friday, the silence had become its own kind of alarm.

Ali had grown used to Wren's careful, guarded rhythm of contact — sparse but reliable, a text every few days even during the worst of the withdrawal, a presence at the edge of things that had never fully vanished even when Wren herself seemed most afraid of what continuing to reach out might cost her. Four days of total silence, after Wren had been the one to hand Ali a stranger's phone number and tell her I couldn't keep watching what it's doing to you and say nothing, felt wrong in a way Ali's body registered before her mind fully caught up to it.

She finally reached Beth on Friday evening, and Beth's voice, when she answered, carried a flatness Ali had never heard from her. "Corinne knows," Beth said, without preamble. "About the number Wren gave you. I don't know how, but she knows, and Wren's been — " a pause, careful, frightened, " — Wren's not answering anyone right now. Corinne says she's taking some time to reconnect with her commitments. I don't like how that sounds any more than you do, Ali, but I don't know what you want me to do about it that doesn't put both of us in worse trouble than we're already in."

Ali hung up shaking, understanding with a sick, plummeting clarity that her decision to reach toward the light had cost someone else, someone who had risked far more than Ali initially understood to hand her a door out. She called Pastor Mercer immediately, half-formed plans already spinning — driving to the estate, confronting Corinne directly, some reckless rescue her exhausted mind assembled out of pure guilt and adrenaline — and he talked her down with a patience that did not waver even as she cried, frightened and furious, down the line at him.

"You cannot save her by charging back into the very darkness you are still fighting your own way out of," he said. "I know that is desperately hard to hear. But Ali, listen to me — you are not the only one being prayed for tonight. I am calling three people the moment we hang up this phone, and we are going to pray for Wren by name, specifically, urgently, the way Christ Himself prayed for Peter by name the night before he denied Him three times. Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you. That prayer did not stop Peter's fall. It secured his eventual return. We cannot control what Wren chooses in the fear she's living in right now. We can put her, by name, in front of the only throne that actually has authority over what's frightening her into silence."

Ali prayed that night for the first time in her adult life with another human being's name held specifically, urgently, in her mouth rather than her own — an act so unfamiliar it felt, at first, almost embarrassing, and then, somewhere in the middle of it, entirely natural, as though some ancient muscle long since atrophied had simply been waiting, all these years, for something worth the exercise.



"For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds." — 2 Corinthians 10:4

The worst single night of the entire ordeal came six days later, a night Ali would describe to Pastor Mercer afterward, haltingly, as the night it stopped being afraid of her fear and started actually trying to take something from her by force.

It began, as it so often had, at 3:11, but the cold this time arrived with a violence that rattled the framed photographs on her bedroom wall, and the voice, when it came, was not alone. She would never be entirely certain, describing it later, whether she had heard multiple distinct voices or a single voice fractured into overlapping layers, but what she understood with total, sickening clarity was that the room had filled with more than one presence, circling rather than simply looming, the way predators circle something they have decided, collectively, to finally bring down.

We gave you everything, one thread of the chorus said, low and wounded, playing the aggrieved lover with a skill that would have worked on her eight months earlier and now simply sounded, to her own surprise, hollow. Another voice, layered beneath it, carried none of that pretense at all — flat, furious, ancient in a way that made her skin crawl even to remember afterward. You belong to us in blood. No borrowed god erases a signature. We will take back in pain what you will not give back in loyalty.

She felt hands — she would never find a better word for it, though she knew, rationally, that no hands were present in any sense a camera could have captured — close around both her wrists, pinning them to the mattress with a strength that left bruises visible for a week afterward, bruises Dr. Patel would examine with quiet, professional concern and no explanation either of them could speak aloud. Ali could not move. She could barely breathe. And in that suffocating, pinned stillness, with every instinct in her screaming that she was about to lose something more final than sleep, she remembered — not chose, not decided, simply remembered, the way a drowning person's hand finds a rope by reflex rather than reasoning — the small worn Bible Ruth had pressed into her hands, sitting exactly where she'd left it on her nightstand.

She could not reach it. Her wrists were pinned. But she found she did not need to hold it to use it. She began, haltingly at first and then with gathering, astonished strength, to speak aloud every fragment of scripture Pastor Mercer and Ruth had given her over the preceding weeks — Colossians 1:13, rescued from the dominion of darkness; 1 John 4:4, greater is He who is in me; the name of Jesus, repeated, plain and unadorned, exactly as she had spoken it the first frightened night this began.

The weight on her wrists did not vanish instantly. But it faltered — she felt it falter, a hesitation in the grip that had not been there a moment before, as though something entirely unused to resistance had encountered, for the first time in this particular room, an obstacle it could not simply push through by force alone. She kept speaking, voice shaking, tears streaming sideways into her pillow, every word costing her more effort than she had ever spent on any working in two full years of practiced ceremony, until the pressure released all at once, and the room, though still cold, went suddenly, blessedly silent.

She lay gasping in the dark for a long time afterward, wrists throbbing, and understood, with a clarity that finally, fully displaced two years of careful self-deception, that she had just won something.

Not the war. She knew, even in the relief of that moment, that the war was not over. But a battle, unmistakably, and won not by her own strength — she had none left to spend — but by a Name she had only just begun to understand she was allowed to use.



"The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword." — Hebrews 4:12

She began reading in earnest after that, not in scattered, desperate fragments anymore but with a hunger that surprised her, sitting up in daylight hours with Ruth's small Bible open across her knees, working through the Gospel of John exactly as Ruth had suggested, then doubling back to the Psalms when Pastor Mercer mentioned, on one of their now-daily calls, that David had written most of them from places of terror not unlike her own.

She found, reading, that certain passages seemed to reach directly into rooms of her life she had never once expected scripture to touch — Psalm 139, which spoke of a God who had known her in her mother's womb, who was intimately acquainted with all her ways, who had not once, across the whole span of a childhood spent in a trailer at the end of Miller's Creek Road, actually been as absent as fifteen-year-old Ali had concluded in an empty fellowship hall. Psalm 91, its promise of refuge under wings and shelter from terror by night landing with a specificity that made her weep the first time she read it fully, no longer a verse recited to her secondhand but words she was, for the first time, reading with her own eyes, in her own apartment, in the exact hours she had spent so many months being hunted.

She began keeping the Bible open on her nightstand rather than closed in a drawer, and though the manifestations did not stop entirely — she still woke some nights to cold and whispering, still caught, occasionally, a shape at the edge of a mirror she had not fully covered — she noticed, with a growing, cautious hope she almost didn't trust herself to name, that the intensity had begun, gradually, to ebb whenever she read aloud rather than silently, whenever she spoke scripture into a room instead of simply holding it, closed, against her chest for comfort. The word was, she was discovering firsthand, not a talisman to be carried but a sword meant to be swung, and the wielding of it, however clumsy her first attempts, seemed to matter more than the mere possession of the blade.



"Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow." — Ecclesiastes 4:9–10

Ruth began inviting her over on Wednesday afternoons, not to the church office this time but to the small, cluttered house she and Pastor Mercer had shared for forty-six years, its shelves crowded with photographs of children and grandchildren and, Ali noticed on her second visit, one faded photograph of a young woman she did not recognize until Ruth followed her gaze and said, quietly, "That's Loretta. The year we got her out. I keep it there so I remember, on the hard days, that it's possible."

Ruth did not lecture. She taught the way a grandmother teaches a recipe, by doing it alongside you rather than describing it from a distance — sitting with Ali at her kitchen table with two Bibles open, showing her how to find a passage quickly, how to commit a handful of verses to memory the way soldiers memorize the parts of a weapon they'll need to assemble in the dark. Psalm 91, entire, took Ali the better part of two weeks, repeating it under her breath while she washed dishes, while she drove, while she lay in the dark waiting to see whether that particular night would demand it of her.

"Memorized scripture doesn't work like a magic word," Ruth told her, the day Ali finally recited the whole psalm without faltering, her voice thick with something between pride and relief. "It's not a spell, sweetheart, and I don't ever want you thinking of it that way, not after everything you've already been taught to think about words having power all on their own. It works because it's true, and because having it memorized means the enemy can't isolate you from it the way he isolated you from everyone who loved you the first time. He can turn off your lights. He can freeze your bank account. He cannot reach into your chest and take out what you've hidden there by heart."

Ali asked her, one of those Wednesday afternoons, the question she had not yet found the courage to ask Pastor Mercer directly. "Do you ever worry I'll go back? After everything you and Elias have both given me?"

Ruth considered the question with the same unhurried honesty her husband brought to everything. "I worry less about whether you'll be tempted," she said finally. "You will be, for the rest of your life, in one form or another — that's simply what it means to have walked as deep into that world as you walked. I worry more about whether you'll let yourself keep reaching for us the moment the temptation comes, instead of going quiet and trying to fight it alone the way you fought everything else your whole life before you ever met Elias. Isolation is the enemy's oldest tool, Ali, older than any candle or any card. Don't let him use it on you twice."



"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape." — 1 Corinthians 10:13

Corinne's final visit came on a Sunday afternoon in early June, and it was, of every encounter Ali had survived across two years inside that world, the most dangerous, precisely because it came wrapped in more genuine-sounding compassion than any of the others had.

"I'm not here to threaten you," Corinne said, settling onto Ali's couch with none of her usual composed authority, looking, for the first time since Ali had known her, genuinely tired, genuinely older than her sixty-some years. "I'm here because I think, underneath everything, I actually do care what happens to you, and I am watching you destroy yourself trying to walk a path that was never built for someone who's gone as deep as you went. I can make it stop, Ali. Not the fear entirely — I won't lie to you and promise that — but the worst of it. A single working, a rededication, nothing like the full initiation. It would buy you peace. Real peace, real sleep, while you figure out, on your own timeline, whatever you still need to figure out about this pastor and his God. You don't have to choose forever today. You only have to choose one more night of rest."

"You make it sound so small," Ali said slowly. "A single working. A rededication. You make it sound like returning a library book late, Corinne, not like signing my life away a second time."

"Because that's closer to what it actually is than you want to believe right now," Corinne said, leaning forward, her voice dropping into the low, confiding register Ali remembered from their very first coffee together, a lifetime ago. "You've built this into an apocalyptic choice in your mind because that pastor needs it to be apocalyptic, needs you to see every door back to us as a door to hell itself, because fear is his tool exactly as much as it was ever mine. I'm not asking you to renounce Jesus, Ali, if that's genuinely what you want to hold onto. I'm telling you there's no reason you can't have both — a little protection from us, a little peace for your body, while you sort out whatever you still need to sort out about your soul. No one has to know. No one has to choose today, forever, in either direction."

It was, Ali understood even as her exhausted body leaned instinctively toward the offer, the single most tempting lie she had been told in the entire two years — not because it promised power, or wealth, or family, the way the earlier lies had, but because it promised the one thing she now wanted more than any of those: simple, uncomplicated rest, no further battle required, just one small compromise standing between her and an unbroken night's sleep.

She sat with the offer for a long, silent moment, and felt, in that silence, the genuine pull of it — how easy it would be, how reasonable Corinne made it sound, how exhausted she was of fighting a war that did not seem interested in ending on any timeline she controlled. And then, unbidden, she thought of Jasmine Farrow, dead on a bedroom floor inside a broken circle of salt, having believed, at some point in her own short life, some version of exactly this same reasonable-sounding compromise. She thought of Pastor Mercer's plain, unhurried voice: God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape.

"No," Ali said, and felt the word cost her more than almost anything she had ever said aloud, and also, in some small, stubborn corner of her chest, felt it land like the first solid step onto ground that would actually hold her weight. "I know what one more working buys, Corinne. It buys you one more year of me. I'm not selling you that year. Not for a night's sleep. Not for anything."

Corinne's face, for just a moment, lost every trace of its careful composure, and what was left underneath it looked, disturbingly, like grief — grief, Ali understood only much later, not for Ali specifically but for a version of herself, decades gone, who might once have made a different choice at a similarly exhausted crossroads, and had not. She left without another word, and Ali never saw her again.



"For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." — Romans 8:38–39

She called Pastor Mercer the moment Corinne's car pulled out of the parking lot, hands shaking with an adrenaline that felt, for once, more like triumph than terror, and found herself laughing and crying in the same breath as she told him what she had said, what it had cost her, and what, astonishingly, had not happened afterward — no immediate retaliation, no cold rising in the room, nothing but the ordinary hum of a Sunday afternoon continuing exactly as it would have continued for anyone else.

"I want to tell you something Ruth reminds me of constantly," Pastor Mercer said, and she could hear, even through the phone, that he was smiling. "Romans tells us nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Not angels. Not rulers. Not powers — the very word Paul uses there, Ali, is the word for exactly the kind of entity that's been tormenting you. Not height, not depth, not things present or things to come. You just told a woman with forty years of practiced manipulation behind her no, and the sky did not fall, and I want you to sit with that fact for a moment before we say anything else. You have never once, in two years, told that kingdom no and watched nothing happen. Today you did. That is not a small thing, Ali. That is the first crack of daylight in a door you have been afraid to even touch for a very long time."

"I'm still not free," Ali said. "I still feel it, some nights. I still don't fully know what I even believe."

"No one is asking you to arrive at the end of the road today," he said gently. "I am only asking you to notice that you are, undeniably, no longer standing exactly where you were standing a week ago. That is what walking looks like, Ali. Not a single dramatic leap. Just one honest no, followed by

another, followed eventually by a yes so much larger than any single no that it changes the shape of everything that came before it."



"Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world." — 1 Peter 5:9

She told Pastor Mercer everything the next morning, the pinned wrists, the layered chorus of voices, the scripture spoken aloud into a suffocating dark until the weight finally broke — and he listened, as he always did, without once flinching, before he told her something she had not expected to hear from a man who had spent forty years fighting exactly this battle alongside exactly these kinds of women.

"You are not the only one who fought last night," he said. "Ruth and I prayed until nearly two in the morning, and Marilyn called at midnight to say she'd woken with your name pressed on her heart so strongly she couldn't go back to sleep without praying it through. You were never as alone in that room as it wanted you to feel, Ali. That is precisely what isolation is designed to convince you of — that your suffering is uniquely yours, uniquely unwitnessed, uniquely unsupported. Peter's letter tells us the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by believers throughout the world, in every generation. You have joined a very old company of people who fought this exact fight and were not consumed by it. That does not make the fight smaller. It makes you considerably less alone in it than you have felt in two long years."

Ali sat with that thought for a long time after they hung up, turning over the strange, humbling comfort of it — that her worst night, the night she had felt most singularly hunted, had in fact been surrounded, unseen, by an old woman's midnight prayer and a pastor and his wife refusing to sleep until dawn confirmed she'd survived it. She had spent two years building an identity on being uniquely chosen, uniquely gifted, uniquely set apart from ordinary people. It was, she was beginning to understand, a far greater mercy to be simply one among many — one more soul a whole invisible company of ordinary, faithful people had decided was worth staying awake for.



"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love." — 1 John 4:18

The last true assault came four nights later, and Ali understood, even as it began, that it would be the last — not because the fear itself was smaller than what had come before, but because something in her own posture toward it had finally, fundamentally changed.

It arrived at 3:11, as it always had, cold flooding the room with a suddenness that still made her heart lurch even after weeks of half-expecting it. But this time, rather than lying rigid and paralyzed, Ali sat up in bed, Bible clutched in one hand, and spoke first, before the voice in the dark could find its opening.

"You don't get to tell me who I belong to anymore," she said, and her own voice, shaking as it was, carried a steadiness she had not heard in it in over two years. "I know what you are now. I know you never loved me. I know Jasmine is dead because of exactly this same lie, dressed up in exactly this same darkness, and I am done being afraid of something that was never stronger than the God I keep hearing you're so desperate to keep me from."

The cold in the room did not simply recede this time. It thrashed — she would find no gentler word for the sensation afterward, a violent, disorganized fury that rattled her windows and sent a framed photograph crashing from her dresser to the floor, glass shattering across the carpet, the voice rising into something closer to a shriek than the low, intimate murmur it had once specialized in, a final, desperate volley of every threat and every flattery it had ever used on her, layered together now with none of the patience that had once made those same words so convincing.

And then, as suddenly as it had risen, it was simply gone — not receding the way a wave recedes, gathering for the next assault, but gone in a way that felt, for the first time in ten months, genuinely final, the room's temperature climbing back to ordinary within seconds, the oppressive, watching pressure that had haunted every corner of her apartment for so long simply, inexplicably, absent.

Ali sat in the sudden, startling quiet of her own bedroom until dawn, Bible still clutched against her chest, and understood, with a certainty that finally reached all the way down to the foundation of her, that she could not walk the remaining distance of this journey alone in her apartment any longer, reading scripture in private, taking her victories one exhausted night at a time. She needed, she understood as the first gray light came up over the city outside her window, to stand somewhere the whole enemy could see her standing — to say, out loud, in front of witnesses, in the one place she had spent fourteen years avoiding, exactly what she had decided.

She picked up her phone as the sun cleared the horizon and texted Pastor Mercer four words, the first words she had ever sent him without a single moment of hesitation behind them.

I'm coming to church.

Chapter 11 – The Cross Breaks the Chains

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." — Luke 15:20

Ali stood outside Cornerstone Fellowship on Sunday morning in a plain blue dress she'd bought years ago and nearly forgotten she owned, watching ordinary families in ordinary clothes file past her through the front doors — a father wrangling two small boys in matching clip-on ties, an elderly couple moving slowly arm in arm, a cluster of teenagers laughing at something on someone's phone — and felt, for one long, paralyzing moment, that she had no right to walk through that door alongside them.

She knew what she was. She had spent two years building an identity around exactly what she was — a woman who had signed her name in her own blood, who had taught two hundred thousand strangers a working that killed a nineteen-year-old girl, who had sat in a basement while thirty confident, wealthy people applauded her initiation into a kingdom that had never once, in all that time, loved her. She did not know what a room full of ordinary, unbroken-looking people would see when they looked at her, and some old, exhausted shame — the same shame that had kept a nine-year-old silent, the same shame that had kept a fifteen-year-old from ever telling Kyle what she'd actually meant by her unanswered prayer — nearly turned her back toward her car.

It was Ruth who found her frozen on the sidewalk, having apparently been watching for exactly this, and simply took her arm the way she might have taken the arm of any nervous newcomer, saying nothing at all about the two years, offering no reassurance that required Ali to first explain herself. "Come sit with us," she said. "You don't have to be ready for anything today except sitting in a chair. That's the whole assignment."

Ali let herself be led inside, and no one stared. No one recoiled, or crossed to the other side of the aisle, or looked at her the particular way she had braced herself to be looked at. She was, to every stranger in that plain, unremarkable sanctuary, simply a woman arriving a little late and a little nervous, exactly like every other frightened person who had ever walked through those doors for the first time — and the sheer, uncomplicated ordinariness of that welcome undid something in her chest she had not expected to come undone in a parking lot before the service had even begun.



"I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock." — Psalm 40:1–2

The service itself held none of the ceremony Ali's body had been trained, over two years, to expect from anything claiming spiritual significance — no candles, no incense, no brass circle inlaid into the floor, nothing but an upright piano slightly out of tune, a handful of voices raised in songs simple enough that even Ali, who did not know the words, found herself mouthing along by the second chorus, and a congregation that sang with more genuine feeling in their plain, unpracticed voices than Ali had ever heard from thirty confident people applauding a bleeding page in candlelight.

She sat between Ruth and Marilyn, who had appeared beside her without comment sometime during the second song, and found herself, for the length of that music, simply crying — not the ugly, wracking grief of the last month, and not performance either, but something quieter, a slow, steady release, like pressure equalizing after a long, painful climb. She did not fully understand the words to the hymn they sang about a rock, about a firm foundation, about a hope that would not be shaken by any wind or wave, but something in the melody itself, plain and unadorned as it was, reached a part of her that two years of increasingly elaborate ceremony had never once actually touched.

When the singing ended and Pastor Mercer climbed, slowly and with visible effort, to the small wooden pulpit at the front of the sanctuary, Ali felt her whole body tense, some old reflex bracing for a performance — the practiced cadence of a man building toward a crescendo, the way Corinne could shape a room's emotions with nothing but the pacing of her voice. What she got instead was an old man opening a worn Bible and simply beginning to talk, unhurried, as though he had all the time in the world and nowhere else he would rather be.



"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." — Romans 10:9

"I want to talk this morning," Pastor Mercer said, "about chains."

He did not look at Ali as he said it, and she understood, gratefully, that he was deliberately not looking at her, giving her the dignity of hearing this as a message for the whole room rather than a spotlight aimed only at her.

"Every single person in this sanctuary is carrying something," he said. "Some of you are carrying grief. Some of you are carrying a habit you cannot break by force of will alone, however many times you have tried. Some of you are carrying a wound someone else put on you, decades ago, that you have

never once told another living soul about. And some of you — a few of you, maybe only one of you, this particular morning — are carrying something heavier than any of that. A door you opened that you didn't fully understand the weight of at the time. A power you reached for because you were starving for something no one around you seemed able to give you, and you found, too late, that what you'd reached for was never going to give it to you either. Only take."

Ali kept her eyes forward, her hands gripping the edge of the pew, feeling as though the old man's words were being read directly off the private pages of her own journal.

"Scripture tells us plainly what the remedy for chains has always been, from the very first pages to the very last," Pastor Mercer continued. "Not effort. Not enough good behavior stacked up high enough to outweigh the bad. Romans tells us it is this simple, and this hard: if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. Not earn your way toward saved. Not eventually, after sufficient penance, arrive at saved. Saved, the moment the confession and the belief become real inside you, because the entire debt was already paid, in full, two thousand years ago, on a Roman cross that was never about your effort at all. It was always, only, about His."

He paused, and his old eyes finally, briefly, found Ali's across the small sanctuary — not accusing, not spotlighting, simply present, the way they had been present in his office weeks earlier.

"He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness," he said, quoting now without needing to look down at the page, "and transferred us into the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. That is Colossians, chapter one. Rescued — not a word for someone who simply improved themselves. A word for someone who was drowning, and someone stronger came into the water after them. Transferred — not earned entry, but a change of citizenship, done to you rather than achieved by you, the moment you stop fighting the hand reaching down for you and simply let yourself be pulled up out of the water."



"He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him." — Colossians 2:15

"I want to say one more thing before I ask anyone to stand," Pastor Mercer said, closing his Bible but not stepping back from the pulpit yet, "because I think there may be someone in this room this morning who has spent a very long time believing that whatever darkness found her was simply too strong, too old, too well established, to ever really be beaten. I want to tell that person plainly: you are not being asked to defeat anything yourself this morning. That work was already finished, in full,

before you ever needed it. Colossians tells us that at the cross, Christ disarmed the rulers and authorities — every power, every principality, every dark thing that has ever demanded worship it was never owed — and put them to open shame, triumphing over them, not someday, not eventually, but there, on that hill, two thousand years ago. The chains you have been wearing were legally broken before you ever put them on. What happens this morning, if you choose it, is not a battle you have to win. It is simply the moment you finally walk out of a cell whose door was unlocked a very long time before you ever knew to try the handle."

He looked out over the small congregation, his old voice steady. "The enemy would have you believe surrender to him was permanent and surrender to Christ is uncertain. It is exactly the reverse. What you signed with him, whatever form it took, was never going to hold up against the cross. What Christ offers you this morning is the only contract in the history of the universe that was paid in full before you ever signed anything at all."



"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." — 2 Corinthians 5:17

The altar call, when it came at the end of the sermon, was as plain and unadorned as everything else that morning — no dramatic lighting, no swelling music built to manufacture an emotional peak, only Pastor Mercer stepping down from the small pulpit and saying, simply, that anyone who wanted to come forward and pray, for any reason at all, was welcome to do so, that no one would ask questions they weren't ready to answer, that the front of this sanctuary was, this morning as every morning, simply a place to stand closer to whatever they'd come here needing to be closer to.

Ali felt the chair beneath her go suddenly, vertiginously unsteady, though it had not moved at all. Every instinct that two years of self-protection had trained into her screamed at her to stay seated, to keep her secrets exactly where they had always been safest — hidden, managed, never fully exposed to a room full of people who could not possibly understand the actual weight of what she was carrying. And beneath that old, familiar fear, something else stirred, colder and more specific, a whisper she recognized immediately, arriving not from the room around her but from somewhere behind her own sternum, the exact register she had learned, at terrible cost, to recognize.

Sit down, it said. You know what happens to people like you who make a public spectacle. You know what Corinne can still do to you, even now, even frozen out of your own bank account. Everyone in this room will see exactly what you are the moment you stand up. They will not want you here either, once they know. No one ever has.

Ali sat frozen for three full seconds, the longest three seconds of her adult life, feeling the old lie try one final time to do what it had done successfully for two years — convince her that exposure was more dangerous than concealment, that shame kept quiet was safer than shame confessed. And then, with a clarity that arrived from somewhere she did not fully understand, she thought of Jasmine Farrow, of Wren gone silent and afraid, of every woman whose name she would never know who had walked the same road she had walked and never found their way back out of it — and she understood, standing on the trembling edge of her own chair, that the old creation the whisper was fighting so desperately to keep her inside of was already, in every way that mattered, finished. The only question left was whether she would let herself become what waited on the other side of admitting it.

She stood up.



"So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." — John 8:36

The walk to the front of that small sanctuary was, Ali would say for the rest of her life, both the longest and the shortest walk she had ever taken — long enough that she felt every eye in the room, real or imagined, weighing on her exposed back, and short enough that she arrived at the front almost before she had finished deciding to go.

Pastor Mercer met her there, no surprise in his face at all, only a steadiness that told her he had been quietly praying for exactly this moment since the first phone call three weeks earlier. Ruth was there a heartbeat later, and Marilyn, and Beth — Ali had not even known Beth was in the sanctuary that morning, had not seen her arrive, and yet there she suddenly was, tears already streaming, one hand on Ali's shoulder as though she had been standing ready for this exact position her whole life.

"Tell Him," Pastor Mercer said quietly, close enough that only Ali could hear it. "Whatever you need to tell Him. He already knows every word of it. But you need to say it out loud, Ali, for your own sake, not His."

Ali knelt on the plain carpet at the front of a small brick church, and the words that came out of her were nothing like the elegant, practiced confessions she had once delivered to paying clients, nothing like the ceremonial cadences of a basement circle. They came broken, and out of order, and soaked in two years of tears she had been too exhausted or too proud to fully release until this exact moment.

"I'm sorry," she said, and the words tore out of her raw, unrehearsed. "I'm so sorry. I chased power because I was starving to be chosen, and I let something use that hunger to take everything from me, and it took Jasmine too, it took a girl who never even met me and trusted my videos more than she

should have, and I can't undo that, I know I can't undo that, but I don't want to belong to it anymore. I don't want to be afraid every single night for the rest of my life. I don't know if I even deserve to be forgiven for everything I let myself become. But if You're real — if You were ever real, this whole time, even in that empty room when I was fifteen and thought no one was listening — I need You to take this. All of it. I can't carry it anymore. I don't want to carry it anymore. Jesus, please. Please."

She felt, kneeling on that carpet with Pastor Mercer's hand light on her bowed head and Ruth's and Marilyn's and Beth's hands resting on her shoulders and back, something break loose inside her chest that she would never be able to fully describe to anyone who had not felt it themselves — not the electric, performative thrill of her very first working two years earlier, and not the cold, suffocating pressure of every haunted night since, but something entirely different from both: a lightness, total and immediate, as though a weight she had carried so long she'd forgotten it was possible to stand without it had simply, all at once, been lifted away.



"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." — 1 John 1:9

She did not know how long she knelt there. Time had gone strange and elastic, the way it does in moments too large for ordinary measurement, and when she finally opened her eyes and lifted her head, she found the small sanctuary around her had gone quiet in a way that did not feel empty but full — full of a stillness she had never once encountered in any candlelit room across two years of increasingly desperate ceremony, a stillness that did not need to be manufactured with incense or ritual because it was not, she understood distinctly, a stillness anyone in that room had created. It had simply arrived, the way sunrise arrives, requiring nothing from anyone present except the willingness to notice it.

"Welcome home," Ruth whispered, pulling her into an embrace that held nothing calculating in it at all, and Ali wept into the older woman's shoulder with an abandon she had not allowed herself since she was a very small child, long before Miller's Creek Road had taught her that tears were, more often than not, simply another vulnerability someone would eventually exploit.

Pastor Mercer prayed over her for a long time after that, plain, unadorned words asking for nothing but her protection and her healing and her freedom, and somewhere in the middle of it Ali felt, for the first time in longer than she could remember, entirely, uncomplicatedly safe — not the counterfeit safety Diane had once offered her across a velvet table, not the manufactured belonging Corinne had dangled in front of her for two years, but something that asked nothing of her in return, required no working, no payment, no continued performance to keep it from being withdrawn.

She drove home that afternoon with the windows down and warm June air moving through the car, and noticed, somewhere on the familiar stretch of road toward her apartment, that she was, for the first time in nearly two years, not braced for anything. Not watching the rearview mirror for a shape that shouldn't be there. Not counting the hours until 3:11. Simply driving, an ordinary woman on an ordinary Sunday afternoon, toward an apartment she no longer felt any dread at the thought of entering.



"And many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all." — Acts 19:18–19

She began in the Sanctum the moment she walked through her own front door, before she could lose her nerve, before the old, exhausted part of her could talk her into waiting for a more convenient day.

She started with the candles — dozens of them, in every correspondence color she had once memorized with the same devotion she'd once given Bible verses for AWANA points as a small child, and she carried them by the armload down to the small concrete patch behind her apartment building where residents were permitted, occasionally, to burn yard waste, and she built a fire in the old rusted barrel there with hands that shook not from fear this time but from something closer to fierce, unfamiliar joy.

The tarot cards went next, box after box of them, the soft-cornered deck she'd bought at a friends-and-family discount and the dozen others she'd acquired since, and she held the first deck in her hand for one long moment before feeding it, card by card, into the flames, watching the Tower and the Devil and Death curl and blacken and disappear into ash that the June wind carried up and away over the rooftops.

The grimoire took longest, the heavy leather-bound book Corinne had gifted her after initiation, dense with two years of her own handwriting, sigils she'd designed and incantations she'd composed, a private, terrible autobiography of exactly how far she had walked into a darkness that had never once loved her back. She sat with it closed in her lap for a long time before she opened it one final time, not to read it but to look, with clear eyes, at exactly what she was releasing — and then she fed it to the fire in sections, watching two years of her own handwriting blacken and curl, feeling with each page something in her chest grow lighter rather than heavier, the exact opposite of everything the working itself had ever promised her.

She burned the black cloth from the altar table. She burned the collection of correspondence charts and printed rituals she'd accumulated. She kept only two things from that room: the rose quartz Diane had given her on the very first night, which she decided, after a long moment of consideration, to give back rather than destroy, and a single, small folded photograph of herself from before any of this began, a marketing coordinator in sensible flats at a company holiday party, smiling a smile that had nothing performed in it at all — a version of herself she had spent two years trying to outrun, and now, standing over a barrel fire with the last of an old life turning to ash and smoke, found she was finally, quietly glad to have a photograph of again.



*"For once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light." —
Ephesians 5:8*

Before the fire had fully died, Ali sat down on the back steps of her apartment building with her phone in her hand and did something she had been too ashamed to do for months: she called her aunt Carol.

Carol picked up on the second ring, her voice cautious, braced, the voice of a woman who had learned not to expect good news from this particular number. "Ali?"

"I don't know how to say this without it sounding strange," Ali said, her voice still raw from the afternoon, "but I need to tell you I'm sorry. For every call I didn't return. For laughing off what you tried to tell me. You were right to be scared for me. I was in something very dark, Carol, darker than I think I can fully explain over the phone, and I got out today. I gave my life to Jesus this morning, in an actual church, for the first time since I was a teenager, and I wanted you to be one of the first people I told."

The silence on the line stretched long enough that Ali wondered if the call had dropped, and then she heard Carol's breath catch, followed by the unmistakable sound of her aunt beginning to cry. "I have been praying for you every single night since that phone call," Carol said, her voice thick. "I didn't know what else to do. Your mother — I couldn't save your mother, Ali, I tried for thirty years and I couldn't, and I was so afraid I was about to watch the same thing happen to you." She laughed, wet and disbelieving. "I have to sit down. I need you to say that part again. All of it. Take your time."

Ali told her — not everything, not yet, some of it still too raw and too strange to hand over in a single phone call — but enough that by the time they hung up, forty minutes later, something between them had been quietly, unmistakably restored. She texted Kayla next, a single line she rewrote four times before sending: I know I have a lot to explain and a lot to apologize for. I got free today. I'd love

to see you if you're willing. Kayla's reply came within minutes, three words that undid Ali completely: I never left.

She did not call Diane that night. That reconciliation, she understood instinctively, would need to happen differently, more carefully, in person rather than over a phone line — but she added Diane's name to a list she had started keeping in the back of the small Bible Ruth had given her, a list of people she intended, in time, to go back for.



"For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." — Colossians 1:13–14

She stood over the dying fire until the last of the light left the sky, watching the final embers sink into gray ash, and found herself thinking, unexpectedly, of a six-year-old girl lying in a ditch behind a trailer at the end of Miller's Creek Road, shoes on, listening for the shouting to stop, believing with the flat, exhausted certainty of a child who has already learned too much about the world that no one was ever going to come for her.

Someone had come for her. Not when she was six, not when she was nine, not when she was fifteen in an empty fellowship hall asking a question she had not been patient enough to wait for the answer to — but eventually, in His own time rather than hers, through a stranger's phone number folded soft in a jacket pocket, through an old man's cardigan and a small worn Bible and a woman named Ruth who held her hands without pricing them. He had rescued her from the dominion of darkness, exactly as the verse Pastor Mercer had quoted that morning promised, and transferred her — not eventually, not after sufficient penance, but already, completed, finished at a cross two thousand years before she was ever born — into a kingdom she was only now, standing over the ashes of everything she had once mistaken for power, beginning to understand she had always, secretly, desperately wanted to belong to.

The chains had not been broken by anything she did. Not by two years of increasingly desperate ceremony, and not, in the end, by the fire she'd just built either — the fire was only the aftermath, the visible evidence of a breaking that had already happened, hours earlier, on her knees on a plain carpet floor. The chains had been broken the way Pastor Mercer told her, that very first phone call, chains were always broken: not by her own strength, which had never once been sufficient, across her whole life, to hold back the ditch or the darkness or the basement forty minutes outside town. But by a cross. By a love that had gone looking for her long before she ever thought to go looking for it.

Ali Gibson walked back inside her apartment that night, into a Sanctum that held nothing now but bare walls and the faint, fading smell of smoke, and for the first time in two years, she did not check the mirror before turning off the light. She simply lay down in her own bed, in the total, ordinary dark, and slept — no cold, no whispering, no shape rising at the foot of the bed — straight through until an unremarkable Monday morning sun came up warm and gold across her bedroom floor, exactly the way it had always come up, every single day, waiting patiently for her to finally notice it was there.

Chapter 12 – Burning the Bridges

"The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, 'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.'" — Luke 8:38–39

Ali sat in front of her camera for nearly an hour before she found the courage to press record, the ring light she had once used to make Selene's face glow with mystical warmth now feeling, in the plain light of a Tuesday morning, like an interrogation lamp aimed squarely at everything she had spent two years hiding.

She had spoken to Pastor Mercer about it the night before, pacing her living room with the phone pressed to her ear, torn between two instincts that felt equally strong and entirely opposed. "I want to just disappear," she told him. "Delete it all. Never speak of Selene again as long as I live. But sixty thousand people are still following an account that hasn't posted in weeks, and some of them are still messaging me asking for readings, still asking me to teach them what I taught Jasmine, and I don't know how to just vanish and leave that door standing open behind me."

"You don't have to decide between hiding and performing," Pastor Mercer said. "There's a third option Scripture actually recommends, and it isn't comfortable, but I think it's the right one. There's a man in the Gospel of Luke who gets healed of a legion of demons — real demons, Ali, not a metaphor — and once he's free, he wants nothing more than to leave everything about his old life behind and follow Jesus somewhere far away from anyone who ever knew him as the man who lived among the tombs. Jesus tells him no. Go home, He says. Declare how much God has done for you, to the very people who watched you at your worst. It is not the comfortable option. It is very rarely the comfortable option. But I believe it is yours to consider."

So Ali sat, ring light glowing, camera lens waiting, and finally, with hands that trembled less than she expected, pressed record.



"Always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect." — 1 Peter 3:15

She did not script it. She had spent two years perfecting a persona built entirely on scripted vulnerability, calculated confessions timed for maximum engagement, and she understood, sitting in front of the camera with her own face bare of the dramatic makeup Selene had always worn, that this particular video could not survive being performed.

"Some of you have been waiting weeks for me to post again," she began, her voice steadier than she expected. "I owe you the truth about why, and I owe someone else's memory more than my own comfort, so I'm going to tell you plainly, even though I know exactly how this will look to some of you, and even though I know I'm about to lose followers, clients, and probably money I can't currently afford to lose." She took a breath. "My name is Ali Gibson. Two years ago I walked into a candle shop grieving and lonely, and a kind stranger introduced me to tarot, to crystals, to what I genuinely believed, for a long time, was a harmless spiritual practice. It was not harmless. I went deeper than I ever intended to go, into a circle I won't name specifically, doing things I am deeply ashamed of, and I taught thousands of you techniques I now believe opened real, dangerous doors — doors that cost a nineteen-year-old woman named Jasmine Farrow her life. I am not telling you this for sympathy. I am telling you because her mother deserves to know I am done teaching what killed her daughter, and because some of you are exactly where I was eighteen months ago, and I cannot in good conscience let one more person walk further into what nearly destroyed me."

She spoke for eleven minutes, longer than any video she had ever posted as Selene, describing without theatrics what she had experienced, what she now believed about the source of it, and what had happened three Sundays earlier on a plain carpet floor in a small brick church. She did not soften the gospel into vague spirituality the way she had once softened her own childhood trauma for public consumption. She said the name of Jesus Christ, plainly, more than a dozen times, and she said, closing the video with her hands folded in her lap, that anyone who wanted to reach her — for prayer, for honest conversation, for help finding their own way out of something similar — could message her directly, and that she would answer every single one herself, without charging a cent.

The response, when it came, arrived exactly as fractured as Pastor Mercer had warned her to expect. Hundreds of comments accused her of an elaborate rebrand, a new persona built for a different, equally lucrative market. A smaller, sharper contingent — women she recognized, with a chill, as having once been active in circles adjacent to Meridian's — left comments dripping with a coldness that felt less like internet cruelty and more like an actual, coordinated message, reminding her, in

careful, deniable language, that some doors did not close as easily as a video implied. But underneath the mockery and the warnings, message after message began arriving in her inbox from women whose names she did not recognize, each one some variation of the same aching, familiar hunger: I think I'm in something similar and I don't know how to leave. Is what you're describing real. Please, can we talk.



One message stood out among the hundreds that arrived that first week, from a woman named Priya who explained, in a long, careful paragraph, that she had been a paying client of Selene's for over a year, had performed three of the workings Ali once taught, and had spent the two days since watching the renunciation video lying awake wondering whether the strange, cold presence she'd started noticing in her own apartment six months earlier was the same thing Ali had just described in such specific, frightening detail.

Ali called her that same night rather than typing a reply, and they spoke for nearly two hours — Ali listening, mostly, recognizing with an ache the exact contours of her own two-year descent in Priya's careful, still-defensive account of her own. She gave Priya Pastor Mercer's number before they hung up, the same way Wren had once handed her a folded scrap of paper in a parking lot, and understood, setting the phone down afterward, that she had just done, for the first time, the very thing Pastor Mercer had promised her sixty thousand followers might eventually make possible: turned a platform built for harvesting the desperate into a doorway, however small, leading somewhere safer.

Not every message was so redemptive. A man identifying himself only as a "concerned former client's husband" sent her three increasingly hostile emails within a single week, accusing her of destroying his marriage by convincing his wife to leave a working half-finished, and though Pastor Mercer gently reminded her that she owed no explanation to threats dressed up as concern, the messages cost her two sleepless nights regardless, old fear rising fast and sour in her chest before she caught herself, breathed, and read Psalm 91 aloud until the fear, though not fully gone, no longer had the room to grow unchecked the way it once would have.



"We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead... we too might walk in newness of life." — Romans 6:4

Ali was baptized on the last Sunday of June, three weeks after kneeling on the carpet at the front of Cornerstone Fellowship, in a modest baptistry behind the pulpit that Pastor Mercer told her, with a

small smile, had been installed the same year he became pastor, "back when I still had the knees to climb in and out of it without Ruth hovering nearby in case I slipped."

The sanctuary was fuller than she had seen it on any previous Sunday — Ruth and Marilyn in the second row, Beth arriving straight from a Saturday spent grading papers with a stack of ungraded tests still visible in her bag, and, astonishingly, in a pew near the back, her aunt Carol, who had driven three hours the moment Ali mentioned the date, arriving the night before and sleeping on Ali's couch for the first time in over a decade, the two of them talking until nearly two in the morning about things neither of them had ever said out loud to each other before.

Standing in the water in a plain white robe, Ali found herself thinking, unexpectedly, of Renee Gibson — not the mother who had failed her in a hundred documented ways, but a much younger woman, glimpsed only in a handful of surviving photographs, who might once, decades earlier, have stood at some water's edge herself with hopes of her own that life had eventually ground down into something smaller and sadder than she'd started with. Ali had spent so long defining herself against her mother's failures that she had rarely allowed herself to grieve the woman underneath them, and standing in the baptismal water, she found room, for the first time, to hold both truths at once: that her mother had wounded her in ways that would take years to fully heal, and that her mother, too, had likely been someone's wounded daughter long before she ever became anyone's failing mother.

"Ali Gibson," Pastor Mercer said, his voice carrying clear and steady through the small sanctuary, "having professed faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

The water closed over her for one brief, weightless second, and when she came up again, gasping, dripping, laughing and crying in the same breath the way she had at the altar three weeks earlier, she understood with a clarity that went beyond words that something had been sealed that no basement circle, no blood signature, no whispered threat in the dark could ever again fully undo. Buried with Him. Raised to walk in newness of life. Not a metaphor recited from a pulpit, but a truth she had just felt, physically, water and breath and her own thundering heart, all of it converging into a single moment she would return to, in memory, on every future night the old fear tried to convince her nothing had actually changed.



"Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed." — James 5:16

The discipleship that followed was, exactly as Pastor Mercer had promised her weeks earlier, neither quick nor painless.

Ruth began meeting with her twice a week rather than once, not merely to study scripture now but to do the slower, harder work underneath it — walking Ali back, gently and without flinching, through the actual architecture of the wounds that had made her so vulnerable to Diane's warm hands in the first place. They talked about Dale, in detail Ali had never spoken aloud to another living person, not even the state-appointed counselor she'd seen briefly at seventeen. Ruth did not offer quick absolution or easy answers about why God had allowed it. She simply listened, and cried with her more than once, and reminded her, session after session, that the shame belonged entirely to Dale Whitfield and had never once, despite what a nine-year-old had been forced to believe to survive it, belonged to Ali.

"You've spent twenty years believing you were somehow responsible for surviving that the wrong way," Ruth told her one Wednesday afternoon, both of them at Ruth's kitchen table with tea going cold between them. "Silent when you should have told. Compliant when you should have fought. I need you to hear me say this plainly, Ali: a nine-year-old child has no wrong way to survive an adult's evil. There was no version of that year where the responsibility was ever, for one single second, yours to carry. You have been carrying someone else's sin as though it were your own for twenty years. Part of what we're doing here, slowly, is helping you finally set down a weight that was never actually yours to hold in the first place."

They talked about Renee too, about the particular grief of a mother who had never once, in life, offered the apology Ali had spent thirty years secretly hoping to receive — grief that discipleship did not erase but did, gradually, over difficult weeks, begin to soften at its sharpest edges, replaced not with forgetting but with something closer to mercy, extended first toward her mother and then, more slowly still, toward the frightened, hungry younger version of herself who had walked into a candle shop looking for exactly what a mother should have given her and never had.



*"For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh." — 2
Corinthians 10:3*

The old fear did not vanish entirely simply because the worst of the haunting had. Ali discovered this on an unremarkable Thursday afternoon in mid-July, standing in the checkout line of a bookstore, when her eyes landed, entirely by accident, on a display of tarot decks near the register — the exact soft-cornered style she had once carried in her own bag for two years, boxed and shrink-wrapped and utterly ordinary in the fluorescent light of a chain bookstore.

She felt her pulse spike, her palms go damp, an old, half-forgotten hunger stirring somewhere beneath the panic that she recognized, with a sick lurch, as not entirely unwelcome — a flicker of the confidence and control those cards had once made her feel, however counterfeit it had actually been. She left her half-purchased items on the counter and walked out to her car, shaking, and sat there for ten full minutes before she trusted herself to drive.

She told Ruth everything at their next session, ashamed of the confession before she'd even finished making it. "I thought I was past wanting it," she admitted. "I thought once it was gone, it would just be gone."

"That's not usually how deliverance works, sweetheart," Ruth said, unsurprised, unbothered by the confession in a way that let Ali release some of the shame attached to it. "Paul tells us we walk in the flesh but do not war according to the flesh, which means this is going to be a fight for a good while yet, not a single won battle you never have to think about again. The desire for that old counterfeit power may visit you again. It visited people far more mature in their faith than you are three months in. What matters is not whether the door ever creaks again. What matters is what you do the moment you notice it creaking. You didn't buy the deck, Ali. You sat in your car and you called me instead. That is not failure. That is exactly what healing looks like in real time, messy and ongoing, not finished and framed."



"Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning." — Psalm 30:5

Kayla drove up on the second Saturday of July, and Ali spent the morning before her arrival in a state of nervous, hopeful agitation she hadn't felt since she was a teenager waiting for a first date.

They met at a coffee shop neither of them had ever been to together, neutral ground, and for the first several minutes, conversation moved with the careful, brittle politeness of two people uncertain how much damage the silence between them had actually done. But somewhere around the second cup of coffee, the old rhythm they'd shared since they were twenty-two years old sharing an apartment with a broken dishwasher began, tentatively, to reassert itself, and by the time the shop's afternoon light had shifted long and gold across their table, they were both crying, laughing, and talking over each other exactly the way they always had before any of this began.

"I looked you up more times than I want to admit," Kayla confessed. "After I stopped hearing from you. I told myself I was checking to make sure you were alive, but really I think I just missed you and didn't know how to say that to someone who'd stopped answering my calls."

"I'm sorry," Ali said, for what felt like the hundredth time that summer, though this apology, unlike so many of the others, came without any of the old defensive posture attached to it. "You tried to tell me. You stood in my apartment and told me I didn't need crystals, I just needed to let you in, and I threw you out instead of hearing it."

"I know why you didn't hear it," Kayla said, reaching across the table to take her hand. "You'd spent your whole life being taught that anyone who really saw you would eventually leave anyway, so why not choose the version of being seen that came with candles and compliments instead of the version that actually asked something real of you." She squeezed Ali's hand. "I'm not going anywhere, Ali. I wasn't going anywhere then, either. You just couldn't believe that yet."

They talked for four hours that afternoon, and though Ali knew, walking back to her car afterward, that full trust would take longer than a single reconciled coffee date to fully rebuild, she felt, driving home in the gold evening light, a specific and unfamiliar kind of joy — not the electric, borrowed thrill of a working paying off, but something steadier, the plain, ordinary gladness of a bridge she had once burned finding, against all odds, a way to be rebuilt from the other side.



"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." — John 3:16

She kept her promise to herself about Diane in the second week of August, driving to The Sacred Ember on a quiet Tuesday afternoon rather than calling ahead, uncertain until she was already standing in front of the familiar door whether Diane would even agree to see her.

Diane looked older than Ali remembered, or perhaps simply looked, for the first time, her actual age rather than the ageless, curated calm she had always projected across the counter of her shop. She did not seem surprised to see Ali standing in her doorway. "I heard," she said simply, stepping back to let her in. "The video. Half my regulars have asked me what I think about it."

"What do you think about it?" Ali asked.

Diane was quiet for a long moment, turning a piece of unpolished amethyst over in her ringed fingers the way she had turned crystals a hundred times before, in a hundred conversations Ali had once found so soothing. "I think," she said finally, "that I have spent thirty years telling myself I was helping people find themselves, and I have spent thirty years watching a small number of them go further than I ever intended and come out the other side of it broken, or worse. I think you frightened me, Ali, walking around alive and whole after everything Corinne's world did to you. It is much harder to keep

believing my own comfortable lies about the shallow end being safe, now that I've watched someone climb all the way out of the deep end instead of drowning in it."

Ali reached across the small table between them and took Diane's hand, the same gesture Diane had offered her on the very first Saturday two years earlier, except now it was Ali extending it, and Ali who meant every bit of the comfort behind it. "I'm not here to convert you in one conversation," she said. "I know that's not how this works. I'm here because you were kind to me when I was grieving and no one else was, even if the kindness led somewhere I never should have followed it. And because I meant what I said in that video. For God so loved the world — not the deserving world, not the already-convinced world. The actual world, Diane. You're still in it. The door hasn't closed."

Diane did not pray with her that day, and did not promise anything beyond agreeing, quietly, to keep Pastor Mercer's number Ali left on her counter. But she held onto Ali's hand for a long moment before letting go, and something in her carefully composed face had cracked open just enough, Ali thought, driving home in the late summer light, that the door Diane had spent thirty years keeping only halfway open might, in its own slow time, finally swing the rest of the way.



"And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." — Philippians 1:6

The practical unraveling of two years took most of the summer, longer and more tedious than any of the spiritual battles that had preceded it, though no less important in its own quiet way.

She never touched the money Preston Cole had grown for her. She met with a lawyer Pastor Mercer's congregation recommended, a soft-spoken deacon named Frank Ostrowski who specialized, as it turned out, in exactly this kind of unwinding — clients extracting themselves from financially entangled, ethically compromised arrangements — and together they worked out a plan to donate the entirety of what remained in her frozen account, once it finally released, to a fund the church was establishing for women fleeing exactly the kind of circle Ali had escaped, a decision that felt, the day she signed the paperwork, like setting down the very last weight of the old life still resting on her shoulders.

She broke her apartment lease at a loss she could not really afford and moved into a small rental across town, one with no room that had ever been anyone's Sanctum, no altar table, no black cloth, nothing at all that carried the residue of the last two years. Pastor Mercer came himself, on the day she moved in, to walk through every room and pray over it, plainly and without ceremony, asking simply that the home be a place of rest rather than siege — and Ali slept, that first night in unfamiliar walls,

more soundly than she had slept in longer than she could remember, in any apartment, in any year of her adult life.

She formally closed the Selene business accounts, redirected her remaining following toward the honest, unglamorous work of pointing frightened women toward real help rather than paid readings, and watched her numbers fall by more than half within a month — a loss that would have devastated her a year earlier and that she found, now, she could hold with something approaching peace, understanding for the first time in her adult life that a smaller number of people actually helped was worth infinitely more than a larger number of people merely impressed.



"Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith." — Hebrews 12:1–2

There was one bridge Ali could not yet rebuild, no matter how many others she managed to mend that summer, and its absence sat with her every single day like a stone she could not set down.

Wren remained silent. Beth had no further updates beyond the same careful, worried uncertainty from weeks earlier, and Ali's own attempts to reach her — texts sent into what felt increasingly like a void, a single unanswered voicemail she'd recorded with her hands shaking — produced nothing at all. Pastor Mercer prayed for her by name every single time Ali asked him to, which was often, and reminded her, gently, each time, that the same God who had reached down into a basement circle to pull Ali out was not any less capable of reaching Wren, on whatever timeline His mercy chose to work on, even if that timeline ran longer than Ali's own patience could comfortably hold.

"I keep thinking about Loretta," Ali told him one evening in late July, sitting in his small cluttered office with a cup of tea going cold in her hands. "Wren's grandmother. She got out eventually, didn't she? Even after three years."

"She did," Pastor Mercer said. "It took eighteen months of very hard work, and there were nights I did not believe we would win her back at all. I tell you that not to promise you the same timeline for Wren, because I don't know what her particular road looks like, and I have learned, across forty years, never to promise a specific outcome I cannot actually guarantee. I tell you that to remind you that the story is not over simply because this particular chapter of it hasn't resolved yet. You are not the last woman this fight will ever be fought for, Ali, and you were not the first. Keep praying. Keep the door open. And in the meantime, keep walking the road in front of you, because there are already other doors opening that need exactly the woman you are becoming to walk through them."

Ali did not yet know, that humid July evening, sitting in a cluttered office with cooling tea and an unanswered prayer for a woman she still thought of, tenderly, as a friend, that Pastor Mercer's words were not simply comfort offered to ease a difficult night. They were prophecy, of a small and ordinary kind, about a season of her life that had not yet begun — a season in which the very platform that had once taught two hundred thousand strangers a working that killed a teenage girl would become, slowly and against every reasonable expectation, something else entirely.

But that summer evening, she only knew this: the bridges behind her were burned, deliberately and for good reason, and the bridges ahead of her were still, mostly, unbuilt. She had nothing left to do but keep walking the unfamiliar, solid ground beneath her feet, one honest day at a time, toward whatever waited for her next.

Chapter 13 – Walking in the Light

"If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." — 1 John 1:7

By September, Ali had stopped counting days.

It happened gradually enough that she almost missed the moment it occurred — the slow, quiet dissolving of a habit that had once organized her entire existence around survival, counting nights without sleep, counting hours until 3:11, counting the space between one manifestation and the next the way a soldier counts artillery shells to guess how much longer a siege might last. She noticed its absence only when she realized, standing in her small kitchen one ordinary Tuesday morning, that she had no idea how many days it had been since anything frightening had happened in her apartment, and that the not-knowing, for the first time in over two years, felt like freedom rather than danger.

Her new rental had become, in the months since she moved in, simply a home — plain, a little sparse, decorated with nothing more mystical than a few framed photographs and a well-worn Bible that no longer sat on her nightstand out of necessity but out of habit, the same unremarkable habit any ordinary believer might have. She slept with her bedroom door open now, no lights burning through the night, no covered mirrors, no black cloth anywhere in the apartment. She had not stopped believing the darkness she'd escaped was real; if anything, she understood its reality more completely than she ever had while still inside it. She had simply stopped organizing her life around fearing it, because she had finally, fully come to believe something Pastor Mercer had told her on their very first phone call and

that had taken months of lived experience to fully settle into her bones: that it was not, and had never been, stronger than the One who now held her.



"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." — Galatians 5:1

The last attempt Meridian ever made to reclaim her came in October, on an ordinary Thursday evening, and Ali would look back on it later as the clearest possible measure of exactly how far she had come.

A woman she didn't recognize approached her in a grocery store parking lot, elegant and unhurried in a way that immediately marked her as belonging to that old world, and delivered, with a polished, practiced warmth, a message on Corinne's behalf — that the door remained open, that Meridian bore her no ill will despite her public renunciation, that certain protections could still be extended to her if she was willing to simply keep quiet about specifics, stop naming names even obliquely in her videos, stop encouraging other members to question their own commitments the way her testimony had apparently begun to do.

Eighteen months earlier, that same approach — the polished warmth, the implied protection, the subtle threat wrapped inside a generous-sounding offer — would have sent Ali into days of anxious spiraling. Standing in a grocery store parking lot with a gallon of milk sweating in one hand, she felt something far steadier rise in her instead.

"Tell Corinne I appreciate her concern," Ali said, meeting the woman's eyes without flinching, "but I don't answer to Meridian anymore, and I'm not interested in negotiating the terms of my freedom with an organization that measures its members' worth by how useful they remain. I'm not afraid of what you're implying. I know exactly who I belong to now, and it isn't anyone in that basement." She paused, and added, with a gentleness that surprised even her, "If you ever want an actual way out yourself, rather than a message to deliver, you have my number. I mean that. The offer doesn't expire."

The woman's composed expression flickered, just slightly, before she turned and walked away without another word, and Ali stood alone in the parking lot for a long moment afterward, not shaking, not flooded with the old adrenaline of fear finally released, but simply steady — a woman standing firmly on ground that had, by then, held her weight through enough difficult nights that she no longer doubted, even for a moment, that it would continue to hold.



She started the Tuesday night group in late September, at Ruth's gentle, persistent suggestion, meeting in the same small church office where Ali had first sat shaking with a cup of coffee she couldn't hold steady — a deliberate, almost defiant reclaiming of the exact night of the week Diane's circle had once claimed for its own purposes.

It began with three women: Priya, whose late-night phone call in July had led to her own halting, tearful conversion in August, sitting now with a Bible of her own, heavily underlined, propped open on her knees; a woman named Denise — not Jasmine's mother, though the shared name struck Ali hard the first time she heard it, a reminder that carried its own quiet grief — who had spent six years in a different, smaller circle two towns over and had found Ali's renunciation video during a sleepless night of her own; and Beth, still cautiously extracting herself from Meridian's outer edges, attending some weeks with visible fear still etched into her face, unable yet to fully commit to leaving but unwilling, either, to stay entirely away from the one room where someone understood exactly what leaving might cost her.

Ali did not lead the group the way Diane had once led her circle, with warm hands and flattering attention calibrated to each woman's particular hunger. She led it the way Ruth had led her — sitting alongside rather than above, Bible open on the table between them rather than a deck of cards, asking more questions than she answered, and reminding each woman, session after session, that the freedom on offer required nothing from them except honesty and the willingness to keep showing up.

"I used to think power meant being the only person in the room who knew things other people didn't," Ali told them one October evening, the small office crowded now with five women rather than three. "I built two years of my life around being the one everyone else needed. I think the hardest and best thing I've learned since is that real freedom looks like the opposite of that. It looks like needing other people, honestly, without performing strength you don't actually have. None of us walk out of what we walked into by being impressive. We walk out of it together, or most of us don't walk out of it at all."



Beth's breaking point came in early November, on a Tuesday night that began exactly like any other and ended with her sobbing so hard into Priya's shoulder that Ali had to close the office door against the sound carrying into the hallway. Corinne had called her that same afternoon, Beth finally admitted, asking pointed questions about who exactly Ali was still in contact with, questions dressed as casual concern that Beth, nine years into her own involvement, recognized with sudden, sickening clarity as the exact same reconnaissance Ali had once described experiencing herself.

"I taught third grade today," Beth said, once the worst of the crying had passed, her voice raw. "I stood in front of twenty-two eight-year-olds and taught them long division, and the whole time I kept thinking, this is the only part of my life that has never once asked anything dishonest of me. I am so tired, Ali. I don't know how to leave nine years of my life behind the way you left two."

"You don't have to know the whole road tonight," Ali told her, echoing words she had received from so many others by then that they had finally become fully her own rather than merely borrowed. "You just have to decide you're done lying to yourself about what Corinne's calls actually are. That's the only step that's due tonight. Everything else can come one Tuesday at a time."

Beth did not renounce anything that night, not formally, not the way Ali once had on a plain carpet floor. But she came back the following Tuesday, and the one after that, and by the time the leaves had fully turned that November, she had begun, haltingly, to use the word leaving out loud in the group for the first time — not yet a decision, but the shape of one, forming slowly the way Ali's own decision had once formed, in small honest admissions long before any single dramatic moment made it visible to anyone else.



"The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me... to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound." — Isaiah 61:1

The message from Wren arrived on a rainy Wednesday in late October, four months of silence broken by a single line that made Ali's hands shake so badly she had to set the phone down twice before she could finish reading it.

I need the number you gave me back then. If it's still good. I think I'm finally ready.

Ali called Pastor Mercer before she even replied, and within the hour, Wren had the same number that had once saved Ali's own life folded into her own trembling hands, though the road that followed was neither quick nor certain. Wren did not walk into Cornerstone Fellowship the following Sunday the way Ali once had. It took another six weeks of careful, halting phone calls — Ali on one end, Wren on the other, sometimes talking for an hour, sometimes sitting in near-silence because Wren couldn't yet find words for what four months inside Corinne's tightened grip had cost her — before Wren finally agreed to meet Ruth for coffee, the same first small step Ali herself had once taken.

"I'm not free yet," Wren told Ali honestly, during one of their long phone calls in November, her voice thinner than Ali remembered it, worn down by months Ali could only guess the shape of. "I don't know if I believe what you believe. I don't know if I'm capable of believing it, after everything I've

done to stay in Corinne's good graces since you left. But I called you instead of nobody, and some nights that feels like the only decision I've made correctly in months."

"That's enough for today," Ali told her, remembering Pastor Mercer's own words to her, months earlier, in almost identical circumstances. "You don't have to arrive anywhere today except closer than you were yesterday. I'm not going anywhere, Wren. I owe you that much and a great deal more."

Wren's road, Ali understood, might take as long as Loretta's had, eighteen months or longer, with no guarantee written into any promise Ali could honestly make her. But the door, for the first time in four months, was open again, and Ali spent that November learning a harder, more patient kind of faith than any single dramatic victory had yet required of her — the faith to keep showing up for someone else's slow, uncertain unraveling, without controlling its pace or its outcome.



"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."
— Matthew 5:14–16

Ali's testimony reached further that autumn than she had ever intended it to, picked up first by a small local news outlet doing a story on the rise of occult influence among young women online, then, within weeks, by a national outlet running a longer feature that used her real name, her real face, and, to her considerable discomfort, several screenshots of Selene's old content juxtaposed against clips from her renunciation video.

The response split, predictably, along the same lines it always had. A wave of mockery followed the wider exposure — strangers online calling her a grifter twice over, once for the occult and once for Jesus, accusing her of chasing a new audience with a new performance, some of the cruelest comments coming, disorientingly, from people who claimed to be Christians themselves, quick to condemn and slow to ask a single honest question about what she had actually survived. She cried over some of those comments more than she wanted to admit to Ruth, old shame rising fast and sharp in response to strangers who knew nothing about the ditch, or Dale, or a fifteen-year-old's unanswered prayer, and who felt entitled anyway to decide, from a screen, exactly how much of her pain was performance.

But underneath the mockery, something larger and steadier kept growing. Messages arrived by the dozens now rather than the occasional handful — women describing circles of their own, families describing daughters they were frightened for, a handful of pastors reaching out to ask if she would be willing, eventually, to speak to their own congregations about what to watch for in young people drawn toward exactly the hunger she once carried. She could not answer every message personally anymore,

not at that volume, and she and Pastor Mercer began, carefully and prayerfully, discussing what it might look like to build something more structured out of what had started as one woman's desperate confession to a camera in her own living room.



One particular evening in late October tested her harder than the anonymous comments ever managed to. A local television reporter, having read the national feature, invited her on air for what was billed as a balanced conversation about "the dangers and appeal of the occult" and turned out, forty seconds into the live segment, to be considerably more interested in a spectacle than a testimony, pressing her with a smirking, performative skepticism that felt, disorientingly, like being back in a room with Corinne — a different kind of predator, dressed in a different kind of professional polish, but hunting, Ali recognized immediately, for exactly the same thing: a reaction dramatic enough to be useful.

She did not give him one. She answered every pointed, half-mocking question with the same plain, unadorned honesty she had learned from Pastor Mercer's pulpit, declining twice to perform the tears the segment's producers had clearly hoped for, and ended her four minutes on air by looking directly into the camera and saying, quietly, that if anyone watching recognized any part of her story in their own life, her door and her Tuesday nights were open to them regardless of what anyone else in the segment thought her testimony was worth.

She cried afterward anyway, sitting in her car in the station's parking lot, not from the reporter's condescension but from the familiar, exhausting sensation of being examined rather than believed. Kayla drove over that same night with takeout and no advice at all, simply sitting with her on the couch until the worst of it passed, and reminded her, gently, close to midnight, of something Ali herself had once told a room full of frightened women on a Tuesday night: that she did not need to be believed by everyone in order to be telling the truth, and that the opinion of a man chasing ratings had exactly as much bearing on her worth as Corinne's cold phone calls once had, which was to say, in the end, none at all.



"You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness." — Psalm 30:11

She drove to Chattanooga in the first week of November, alone, telling no one beforehand except Ruth, and stood for the first time in over a year at her mother's grave — a modest stone in a modest

cemetery, grass slightly overgrown around its edges, the kind of grave that received few visitors and asked for none.

She had not come to forgive Renee in any single, dramatic moment; Ruth had taught her enough, by then, to know forgiveness rarely arrived as one clean transaction and more often as a long, repeated choosing, renewed on difficult days as much as easy ones. But she came that November morning with something she had never once managed to bring to any prior visit: an open hand rather than a clenched one.

"I used to come here angry," Ali said aloud, alone in the quiet cemetery, feeling foolish and unfoolish in equal measure. "I think some part of me is still angry, and I don't think that part is going away completely, not for a long while yet. But I don't want to carry it the way I've been carrying it, Mom. I don't think you knew how to give me what I needed. I don't think anyone ever taught you either. I forgive you — not because what happened didn't matter, but because I don't want it to keep shaping every single thing I do for the rest of my life the way it has for the last thirty years." She knelt and set a small bundle of flowers against the modest stone. "I hope, if there's any mercy in the world beyond this one, that you found some peace before the end. I'm choosing to believe that's possible, even though I never got proof of it while you were here."

She did not visit Dale, would likely never see him again in her lifetime, had no address or number even if she'd wanted to. But she wrote him a letter that same week that she never mailed, working through, page by difficult page, exactly what she had carried silently for twenty years, and burned it afterward in her kitchen sink — not the same fire that had once consumed her Sanctum, but a smaller, quieter one, the particular fire of a woman finally setting down a weight that had never been hers to carry in the first place, exactly as Ruth had told her, months earlier, at a kitchen table with cooling tea between them.



"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." — 2 Timothy 3:16

Ruth and Pastor Mercer's mentorship did not end once the crisis had passed, and Ali found, moving into winter, that the ongoing rhythm of it had become one of the steadiest joys of her new life — Wednesday afternoons with Ruth, Sunday mornings in the small brick sanctuary, a growing fluency in scripture that no longer felt like memorized ammunition for spiritual battle but simply like the native language of a life she was still learning to fully inhabit.

"You've changed since June," Pastor Mercer told her one evening, the two of them sitting in his cluttered office as the last of the daylight faded outside the window. "Not just healed. Changed. I watch you with the women in your Tuesday group now, and I see someone who has stopped needing to be the most powerful person in the room. That is a harder transformation than the deliverance was, in some ways, though I doubt you'd have believed me if I'd told you that back in May."

"I still have bad nights," Ali admitted. "Not like before. But sometimes. I still catch myself flinching at mirrors I have no reason to flinch at."

"You will, for a good while yet," he said. "Scripture doesn't promise instant erasure of every scar. It promises something better, if less immediately dramatic — that the God who began this work in you will carry it to completion, in His timing rather than yours. Let the bad nights be evidence of how far you've traveled rather than proof you haven't traveled far enough. A woman with no scars left to notice would have nothing left to testify to."



"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." — Jeremiah 29:11

Ali spent a long evening in early December turning the year over in her mind, sitting at her kitchen table with a cup of tea and the small worn Bible Ruth had given her six months earlier, its cover now soft and creased from daily use in a way that reminded her, not unpleasantly, of the tarot deck she'd once carried everywhere and finally burned in a rusted barrel behind an apartment she no longer lived in.

She thought about the version of herself who had walked into a candle shop on a rainy September Saturday, twenty-nine years old and so hungry to be chosen that she had mistaken the first warm hands that reached for her as love. She thought about Jasmine Farrow, whose name she still said in prayer every single week, a grief that had not lessened so much as settled into something she now carried deliberately rather than being crushed beneath it — a permanent, sorrowful reminder of exactly why the Tuesday group mattered, exactly why she answered every message personally for as long as she possibly could, exactly why she had said yes to Colette Ashworth's invitation without the old performance of reluctance she might once have offered before privately hoping to be talked into it.

She did not know, that December evening, everything the coming spring would ask of her — did not know yet how large the conference audience would eventually be, did not know how many more Tuesday nights it would take before Wren finally walked through Cornerstone's doors herself, did not know that Diane would call her, unprompted, on a Sunday morning in February to ask, in a voice

smaller than Ali had ever heard from her, whether the offer to talk with Pastor Mercer still stood. She only knew, closing her Bible and switching off the kitchen light without a single flicker of the old dread that used to accompany that exact gesture, that the God who had reached into a candlelit basement and pulled her out by a stranger's phone number had not brought her this far to abandon the plan He'd apparently been building all along — plans for welfare, the old prophet had written, and not for evil, a future and a hope she was only just beginning to see the shape of.



"Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me all that I ever did.'" — John 4:39

The invitation arrived the second week of December, forwarded to her through Pastor Mercer from a woman named Colette Ashworth, who organized, it turned out, an annual regional conference for women who had escaped various forms of occult and cultic involvement — several hundred attendees expected, survivors and their families and the pastors and counselors who walked alongside them, gathering each spring to encourage one another with exactly the kind of testimony Ali had spent the last six months quietly building, one Tuesday night group and one late-night phone call at a time.

Would you be willing to speak, the invitation read. Not as a curiosity, and not as a cautionary tale alone, though your story is certainly both of those things to the women who need to hear it. We would want you to speak as what you actually are now: living proof that the door out is real, and that it opens all the way, no matter how far in a person has gone.

Ali sat with the invitation for a long time before she showed it to anyone else, feeling the old, familiar vertigo of being asked to stand in front of a crowd — except this time, she noticed, examining the feeling carefully the way Ruth had taught her to examine her own reactions rather than simply obey them, the vertigo held none of the old hunger underneath it. She did not want to stand in front of several hundred women because she was starving to be seen. She wanted to stand in front of them, she realized, because she had finally found something worth being seen holding — not a deck of cards, not a candle guttering sideways in a windowless room, but a single, plain, unglamorous testimony that had already, in six short months, begun setting other captives free.

She said yes before the week was out, with a steadiness in her own chest she recognized, gratefully, as belonging entirely to the light she had finally learned to walk in rather than to any darkness she had ever mistaken for power.

Chapter 14 – From Medium to Messenger

"So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to another generation, your power to all those to come." — Psalm 71:18

The conference fell on the second weekend of April, ten months almost to the day since Ali had knelt on a plain carpet floor and finally said the words she had spent two years too proud and too frightened to say out loud.

She spent the drive down turning that arithmetic over in her mind — ten months, the length of a pregnancy, she thought, and then almost laughed out loud at herself in the empty car for how fitting the comparison actually was, because that was exactly what the last ten months had felt like, something new and unfamiliar growing inside a life that had once been organized entirely around darkness, until the growing itself had become the most ordinary thing about her. Ruth rode with her the whole way, and Pastor Mercer and Marilyn followed in a second car behind them, an entourage Ali had not asked for and could not, when she tried to imagine making this particular drive alone, actually picture herself attempting.

"Nervous?" Ruth asked, somewhere past the halfway point, watching Ali's hands tighten slightly on the wheel.

"Terrified," Ali admitted. "Not the way I used to be terrified. Not 3:11 terrified. Just — ordinary terrified. The kind anyone would feel about standing in front of four hundred strangers and telling them the worst things I've ever done."

"That's not the same fear you walked in with a year ago," Ruth said gently. "That fear had teeth. This one is just weather. You can stand in weather, Ali. You've been standing in far worse than this for months now."



"And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then I said, 'Here I am! Send me.'" — Isaiah 6:8

The conference hotel's ballroom held, by Ali's rough count from the wings, closer to four hundred fifty than the four hundred Colette Ashworth had originally estimated — round tables filling nearly the entire floor, a small stage at the front with nothing on it but a podium, a single stool, and a screen that

had, throughout the morning's earlier sessions, displayed nothing more dramatic than each speaker's name in plain white lettering.

Ali stood backstage during the introduction, Ruth's hand tight around hers, and found herself praying the way she had learned to pray over the last ten months — not the elaborate, ceremonial incantations she'd once spoken over a black candle, but plain, unadorned words, sent upward with no performance in them at all. Here I am, she thought, feeling the old prophet's ancient answer settle over her own trembling chest. Send me. I don't feel remotely ready. Send me anyway.

Colette Ashworth's introduction was brief and unembellished — a woman's name, a short description of what had happened to her and what she had since built out of the wreckage of it, no dramatic music, no theatrical lighting, nothing but a room full of women, many of whom Ali could see even from the wings were already crying before she'd said a single word, women who recognized, in the mere fact of her presence on that stage, something they themselves were still hoping might one day be possible for them too.



"And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death." — Revelation 12:11

Ali's phone buzzed once, backstage, in the final minute before her name was called, and she almost silenced it without looking — until she saw the name on the screen and felt her breath catch entirely.

Wren. A single line, sent, according to the timestamp, less than ninety seconds earlier: I'm here. Back row, aisle seat. I finally let Ruth talk me into coming. Go do what you came here to do. I'll be right here when you're done.

Ali stood frozen for one full second, tears rising so fast she had to blink hard against them, feeling the weight of eleven months compress into a single line of text — every unanswered call, every careful, halting phone conversation, every night she had prayed a specific name into the dark not knowing whether the prayer would ever be answered in her own lifetime, let alone in time to matter. She thought of Loretta, eighteen months in the making, and understood, standing in the wings with her phone still trembling in her hand, that Wren's own eighteen months had just, apparently, arrived considerably sooner than either of them had dared to hope.

"Ali Gibson," Colette Ashworth said from the podium, and the room began to applaud before Ali had even stepped fully into the light.



"How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?... How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" — Romans 10:14–15

She did not use notes. She had prepared some, careful pages typed and re-typed over the preceding weeks, and had left every one of them backstage in Ruth's bag, understanding somewhere in the final hour before she walked out that the testimony she needed to give could not survive being read rather than simply spoken.

"My name is Ali Gibson," she began, her voice carrying out over four hundred fifty faces she could not fully make out past the stage lights, "and for two years, most of the people in this room would have known me by a different name. Selene. A gifted intuitive, my old website called me. A woman with a natural connection to the unseen." She let the words sit for a moment. "I want to tell you today exactly what that connection actually cost, because I think some of you are sitting in this room right now still wondering whether the door you're standing in front of is really as dangerous as the people who love you keep insisting it is. I promise you, it is. And I promise you something else too: the door out is real, and it opens all the way, no matter how far in you've already gone."

She told them about Miller's Creek Road, about Dale, about a fifteen-year-old's unanswered prayer in an empty fellowship hall. She told them about Diane's warm hands in a candle shop, about a black candle guttering sideways in a windowless room, about Tyler's ruined career and the electric, addictive thrill of believing, for the first time in her life, that something was finally listening. She told them, her voice breaking for the first time, about Jasmine Farrow, a name she made sure every single person in that ballroom heard clearly, spoken slowly enough that no one could mistake it for anything other than what it was: a debt she would spend the rest of her life trying, in some small way, to repay.

She told them about the basement forty minutes outside a town most of them had never heard of, about a blood signature on an ancient page, about a voice that had risen at the foot of her bed and told her, in words she still heard sometimes in the quietest hours of the night, exactly what she had become. She told them about an old pastor and his wife who had never once, across months of increasingly desperate phone calls, made her feel like a project rather than a person. And she told them, finally, about a plain carpet floor at the front of a small brick church, about water closing over her head in a modest baptistry, about a fire built in a rusted barrel behind an apartment she no longer lived in, feeding two years of candles and cards and a leather grimoire into flames that had, for the first time in longer than she could remember, made her feel lighter rather than heavier with every page that burned.

"I spent years trying to speak to spirits," Ali said, and the ballroom had gone entirely silent, four hundred fifty women leaning almost imperceptibly forward in their seats. "I lit candles and shuffled cards and knelt in a basement bleeding onto a page, all so that something, anything, would finally answer when I called out into the dark. And then I met the One who created every spirit I had ever tried so desperately to summon — the One who was never silent, who was never distant, who had been standing at the door the entire time I was searching everywhere except toward Him." She held up the small worn Bible Ruth had given her nearly a year earlier, its cover soft now from a year of daily handling. "Satan promised me power. He gave me chains, and called them a gift, and I was too hungry to be chosen to notice the difference until it very nearly cost me everything, including my life. Jesus Christ did not promise me power at all. He simply died so that I could have life — actual life, not the counterfeit I'd been settling for — and then He gave it to me anyway, freely, the moment I finally stopped running long enough to receive it."



She paused before stepping down from the podium, looking out over the room one final time. "I know some of you came today still uncertain," she said. "Maybe you're not sure any of this is for you. Maybe you've built a life, like I once tried to build one, on the idea that power you can see and touch and control is safer than a God you have to trust without seeing Him directly. I understand that instinct better than almost anyone in this room. I lived inside it for two years. I only want to leave you with one honest question before I go sit back down: what has your power actually given you? Because mine gave me sleepless nights, a dead nineteen-year-old girl I will grieve for the rest of my life, and a chain of debt I could never have paid off on my own no matter how skilled I became at pretending otherwise. What Jesus has given me in the ten months since is a family I did not earn, a freedom I did not deserve, and a peace I still sometimes can't quite believe is allowed to belong to someone who did what I did. I'm not asking you to take my word for it. I'm asking you to test it the way I finally tested it, on the worst night of my life, when I had absolutely nothing left to lose by saying His name out loud instead of running from it one more time."

A woman near the front stood up before Ali had even finished her final sentence, tears streaming, and though Ali would never learn her full story, she watched Colette Ashworth quietly make her way to the woman's side, saw the woman's shoulders finally, visibly loosen for what looked like the first time in a very long while, and understood that whatever had needed to happen in that particular seat had already, in some small unglamorous way, begun.



"As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace." — 1 Peter 4:10

The applause that followed lasted longer than Ali knew what to do with, and she stood at the podium through most of it simply breathing, feeling ten months of grief and terror and slow, hard-won healing settle, for one suspended moment, into something that felt almost like peace holding still long enough to be fully noticed.

Women lined up afterward in a queue that stretched the length of the ballroom and out into the hallway beyond it, and Ali stayed for nearly three hours, past the conference's official schedule, past Colette Ashworth's gentle, repeated suggestions that she take a break, listening to story after story that echoed her own with a specificity that broke her heart fresh each time — a woman whose daughter had followed an online psychic into a debt she couldn't climb out of, a grandmother searching for the right words to reach a granddaughter she suspected was already three years deep into something she barely understood, a trembling twenty-year-old who admitted, voice barely above a whisper, that she had a coven meeting scheduled for that very Tuesday night and did not yet know if she had the courage to skip it.

Ali gave that last young woman her number the way Wren had once given her Pastor Mercer's, the way she had given her own number to Priya, to Denise, to a dozen other frightened women over the preceding ten months — the same gift, passed hand to hand, exactly the way Loretta's gift had once passed through Pastor Mercer to Ali and was now passing, through Ali, to whoever needed it next.



"The Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." — 2 Corinthians 1:3–4

Wren was waiting exactly where she'd said she would be, back row, aisle seat, when Ali finally made her way through the thinning crowd, and the two women held each other for a long time without either one managing a single word, eleven months of fear and silence and careful, halting phone calls finally, physically, closing the distance between them.

"I almost didn't come," Wren admitted, pulling back at last, her eyes red-rimmed but steadier than Ali had seen them in over a year. "I sat in my car in the parking lot for forty minutes. Ruth finally texted and told me you'd be devastated if I chickened out after everything, and I realized I didn't

actually want to be the reason you were devastated about anything ever again, so I made myself walk in."

"I'm so proud of you," Ali said, and meant it with a completeness that surprised even her, the exact words she had spent thirty years aching to hear from her own mother and had, instead, learned to offer freely to someone else entirely.

The whole strange, hard-won family of the last ten months gathered that evening in a private room off the hotel restaurant — Ruth and Pastor Mercer, Marilyn, Wren still finding her footing among people who had prayed her by name for months before ever meeting her in person, and, arriving late from a three-hour drive she had insisted on making the moment she heard about the conference, Aunt Carol, who hugged Ali so hard and so long that Kayla, arriving five minutes behind her, had to physically pry the two of them apart with a laugh Ali hadn't heard sound so entirely unguarded in years. Even Diane sent a message that evening, the first Ali had received from her in weeks: I heard how it went today from Ruth. I finally called Pastor Mercer's number. I'm not making any promises yet. But I wanted you to know I called.

Ali sat at the center of that crowded table long after the meal had ended, looking around at every face gathered there — women who had comforted her with the exact comfort they themselves had once received, in a chain that stretched back, she understood now, far further than she could trace, from Loretta to Pastor Mercer to Ali to Priya to a trembling twenty-year-old whose name she had only just learned that afternoon — and felt something settle in her chest that no candle, no card, no basement circle applauding her initiation had ever once managed to give her: the plain, unglamorous, entirely sufficient joy of belonging somewhere she had not had to earn her way into, surrounded by people who would still be there, she now trusted completely, on the mornings she woke up broken as well as the mornings she woke up whole.



Before the table finally broke up for the night, Pastor Mercer stood, slow and stooped as always, and raised his water glass in a toast that felt, to Ali, like the closing of a circle that had opened on a desperate phone call nearly a year earlier.

"I want to say something, and then I'll let all of you get some rest," he said, his old voice carrying easily over the quieted table. "Forty-one years ago I helped pull one woman out of a darkness very much like the one Ali described today. I did not know, watching Loretta walk free all those years ago, that I was watching the first thread of something that would eventually reach a young woman I hadn't met yet, in a town I hadn't moved to yet, through a granddaughter neither of us had any way of knowing would someday need exactly what her grandmother once needed." He looked around the table, at Ruth, at Wren, at Ali, at Marilyn, at Carol and Kayla sitting close together as though they, too,

understood they were witnessing something larger than a simple reunion dinner. "I have watched the Lord do this again and again across forty years, and it has never once stopped humbling me how patient He is willing to be, how many decades He is willing to work a single thread of mercy through, and how faithfully He keeps finding new hands to place that thread into once the old hands grow too tired to keep holding it alone. Ali, you asked me once, on our very first phone call, whether you had any right left to ask God for anything after everywhere you had already been. I want you to look at this table tonight and understand, once and for all, what His actual answer to that question was."

Ali could not speak for a long moment, looking around at every face gathered there, and finally simply raised her own glass, wordless, and let the silence say what she could not yet trust her voice to say without breaking entirely.



"For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." — Colossians 1:13–14

Ali learned, weeks later, secondhand through a nervous call from Beth, that Meridian had not folded simply because one of its most visible members had walked away and taken a public platform with her. Corinne remained exactly where she had always been, forty minutes outside a town that had never stopped offering her a fresh supply of hungry, grieving newcomers, and Preston Cole had, according to Beth, already found two new clients to replace the accounts Ali's departure had cost him. The basement circle still met on its own schedule, the brass inlay still waited in the floor for its next initiate, and somewhere in that ongoing darkness, Ali understood, other women exactly like she had once been were, at this very moment, mistaking a warm hand and a burning candle for the answer to a prayer no one else had ever seemed to hear.

She grieved that knowledge rather than let it discourage her. Pastor Mercer had told her once, in the earliest and hardest weeks of her own deliverance, that she was not the last woman this particular fight would ever be fought for, and she understood now, standing on the other side of everything that fight had cost her, that the same battle Diane and Corinne had once waged for her own soul was still being waged, this very week, for someone whose name she did not yet know and might never learn — which was precisely why the conference, and the Tuesday nights, and every message she answered personally at eleven at night when she would rather have simply gone to sleep, mattered as much as they did. The war was not over because one soldier had come home. It simply meant one more soldier was now standing on the other side of the line, ready to help pull the next one across.



Late that afternoon, before the crowded dinner and the long drive home the following morning, a young woman Ali did not know slipped quietly away from the edge of the dispersing ballroom crowd, moving with the particular carefulness of someone trying not to be noticed leaving.

She could not have been older than twenty-two, dressed in the kind of soft, deliberately ethereal clothing Ali recognized immediately from a version of herself she had spent ten months learning to set down — and she carried, tucked inside an open purse Ali happened to glimpse as the young woman passed close by on her way toward the hotel lobby, a familiar deck of cards, soft-cornered from handling, the same worn edges Ali's own first deck had once carried after months in her coat pocket.

The young woman walked to a trash can near the hotel's front entrance, alone, unwatched by anyone who might have made the moment feel performed rather than private, and stood there for a long moment with the deck held in both hands, the way a person holds something they have loved even while finally understanding they must let it go.

She opened the box.

One by one, without ceremony, without an audience, without a single candle burning or a single word spoken over them, she began dropping the cards into the trash — the Tower, the Devil, Death, the whole gilded, deceptive architecture of a power that had never once been what it promised — until the box sat empty in her hands and she stood there a moment longer, breathing, before she turned and walked back toward the hotel's revolving doors, toward the lingering edge of a conference crowd that included, though she did not yet know it, a woman who had once burned an entire life's worth of exactly what she had just thrown away, and who would, if this young stranger ever worked up the courage to ask, tell her without hesitation that the door out was real, that it opened all the way, and that on the other side of it, against every reasonable expectation a hungry, searching heart might have carried through those doors, something patient and undefeated had been waiting for her all along.

The cycle of redemption, unannounced and unwitnessed by anyone but a God who had never once stopped watching, began again.

Chapter 15 – The Devil Lost One

"Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble." — Psalm 107:1–2

Five years to the month after she had knelt on a plain carpet floor and said words she had spent two years too proud and too frightened to speak, Ali Gibson stood in the parking lot of a church she had never once set foot inside, checking her reflection in her car's side mirror out of habit rather than vanity, and felt something she had not expected to feel on a night this significant: calm.

Not the manufactured calm of a woman who had learned to perform composure for a camera. Not the brittle, exhausted calm of a woman simply too depleted to feel anything else. A settled, unhurried calm that had taken five years to fully grow into her bones, the way a tree takes years to grow rings dense enough to survive a real storm rather than merely bending gracefully in a light wind.

The church tonight was not Cornerstone Fellowship, though Cornerstone's small brick sanctuary remained, in every way that mattered to her, the place she still called home most Sundays. This was Riverbend Community Church, a sprawling building on the other side of the county that seated close to two thousand, hosting a citywide gathering of nearly a dozen congregations for what the organizers had, with more sincerity than marketing polish, simply titled A Night of Testimony. Ali had agreed to speak the moment the invitation arrived, though agreeing had cost her, even after five years, a familiar flutter of nerves she had come to recognize not as fear exactly, but as evidence that the story she was about to tell still mattered enough to her own heart to make her hands tremble slightly reaching for the door handle.

She thought, walking toward the entrance, of a girl of six lying in a ditch behind a trailer, of a girl of nine believing silence was the only currency she had left to spend, of a girl of fifteen closing her eyes in an empty fellowship hall and asking a God she was fairly sure wasn't listening to explain a ditch He had apparently let her lie in alone. She thought of a candle guttering sideways in a windowless room, of a basement forty minutes outside a town whose name most of tonight's audience would never know, of a black candle and a leather grimoire reduced to ash in a rusted barrel behind an apartment she no longer lived in. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, she thought, feeling the old verse settle over her like a coat against the evening chill. Tonight, in front of two thousand strangers, she intended to say so as plainly and as loudly as her voice would carry.



"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." — 2 Timothy 4:7

Pastor Elias Mercer had retired from full-time ministry at Cornerstone Fellowship two years earlier, his knees finally winning the long argument they had been having with the rest of him since long before Ali had ever met him, and a younger pastor now filled the small pulpit most Sundays. But he had not, in any sense that mattered, retired from the work itself. He and Ruth still met with Ali every

other Wednesday, still fielded midnight phone calls from frightened women Ali sent their way, still drove, whenever their health allowed it, to every conference and every citywide gathering Ali was ever invited to speak at, sitting near the front with the quiet, watchful pride of two people who had spent forty-six years of marriage and better than four decades of ministry pouring themselves into exactly this kind of night without ever once expecting to see the full harvest of it themselves.

Ali found them in the third row before she went backstage, and Pastor Mercer, stooped further now than he had been five years earlier, took both her hands in his weathered ones the way he had the very first afternoon she'd walked into his cluttered office half out of her mind with terror.

"You look steady," he said, studying her face with the same unhurried attention he had always given her. "Not performing steady. Actually steady."

"I learned from the best," Ali said, and felt her eyes sting, because it was, in every sense that mattered, entirely true.

"I want you to know something before you go up there tonight," he said, his voice quieter now, meant only for her. "I have watched a great many women walk through the door of my office over forty-some years, frightened and certain they had gone too far to ever come back. Most of them did come back, by God's mercy, though the road was never quick for any of them. But I have never, in all those years, watched anyone turn what she survived into as much fruit for as many others as you have in these five years, Ali. Loretta would be so proud of you, if she were still here to see it. I know I am." He squeezed her hands once, firm despite the tremor age had put into his grip. "Go finish the race tonight the way you've been running it. I'll be right here in this seat, exactly like every other night."



"I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten." — Joel 2:25

She thought, waiting in the wings while the evening's earlier speakers finished their own testimonies, of everyone the last five years had touched, of every thread that had once seemed hopelessly frayed and had, slowly, against every reasonable expectation, been rewoven into something whole.

Wren had walked fully free of Meridian within eighteen months of that first tentative text message, exactly the length of time it had once taken Loretta, and had gone on, in the years since, to complete a counseling degree specifically so she could sit across from other frightened women the way Ruth had once sat across from her — Wren, who now co-led the Tuesday night group Ali had started, the two of them dividing the work that had once belonged to Ali alone, the group itself having outgrown the small

church office twice over, meeting now in Cornerstone's larger fellowship hall most weeks. Beth had left teaching third grade for exactly one difficult year while she rebuilt her life outside Meridian's reach entirely, then returned to her classroom with what her fellow teachers described, without knowing the full story behind it, as an unshakable new steadiness; she still attended Tuesday nights herself, not as a leader but simply as a woman who understood, better than most, that healing rarely finished on any tidy timeline.

Kayla had stood beside Ali as her maid of honor eighteen months earlier, when Ali married a quiet, steady man named Josiah she'd met, of all places, in the same Tuesday night group, a widower who had lost his first wife to a different kind of darkness entirely and had found, in Ali's Bible study, the first community since his own grief that had not asked him to pretend he was further along than he actually was. Aunt Carol had walked her down the aisle that same afternoon, the closest thing to a father Ali had left, weeping through the entire short ceremony in a way that had made half the small congregation weep along with her.

And Diane —

Ali still could not think of Diane's name without her breath catching, even five years later. Diane had called Pastor Mercer's number for the first time eleven months after the conference where Ali had first spoken publicly, and had spent nearly two full years in careful, halting conversation with Ruth before finally, on a quiet Tuesday afternoon in The Sacred Ember's back room — the very room where Ali's own descent had begun — kneeling with Ruth beside the same round velvet table and asking Jesus Christ, in a voice Ali was told later had shaken as badly as her own once had, to take a life she had spent thirty years mistaking for wisdom. The Sacred Ember closed its doors eight months after that, its crystals and candles donated to a community theater in need of props, and Diane now spent her Tuesdays exactly where Ali did, sitting in the same circle of chairs, no longer the one flattering hungry, grieving women with warm hands and calculated attention, but simply one more woman, seventy years old, learning, alongside women a third her age, what it meant to be loved without first being useful.

Ali had been there for that quiet Tuesday afternoon, at Diane's own halting request, and would carry the memory of it for the rest of her life as one of the strangest and most sacred hours she had ever witnessed. The Sacred Ember's back room, stripped by then of most of its inventory, still held the same round table draped in deep purple velvet where Ali had once had her very first reading, the same table where a rose quartz had been pressed into her palm on a rainy September Saturday a lifetime earlier. Diane had insisted on kneeling at that exact table rather than anywhere else, saying only, when Ruth gently asked why, "because if He can reach me here, in the exact room where I did the most damage to the most people, then I need to know it happened here and not somewhere safely separate from all of it."

She had wept for a long time before she could speak at all, Ruth's hand steady on her shoulder, Ali sitting silently across the velvet table where she had once sat as a grieving twenty-nine-year-old testing water she wasn't ready to enter. When Diane finally did speak, her confession had none of the composed, practiced warmth Ali remembered from their very first conversation — only a raw, unguarded honesty that Ali suspected had been building somewhere underneath Diane's polish for the better part of four decades. "I don't know how many women I sent further into darkness than I ever should have," Diane had said. "I don't know how many of them survived it and how many didn't. I can't undo any of it. I only know I am so tired of pretending the shallow end was ever actually safe, and I don't want to die still pretending it." She had asked forgiveness that afternoon, first from God and then, turning to Ali with an expression Ali had never once seen her wear, from Ali herself, for the door she had opened that neither of them had fully understood the weight of at the time.

"I forgave you a long time ago," Ali had told her, and meant it completely. "I forgave you the same week I forgave myself, because I finally understood we'd both been running from the exact same hunger, just at different distances from the fire." The two women had held each other for a long time after that, two decades and one terrible detour apart in age, finally standing on the same solid ground.



Meridian itself had not disappeared, not entirely — Ali had learned, through Beth's continued careful contact with a handful of former members, that Corinne still led what remained of the circle, though its numbers had thinned considerably in the years since two of its most visible members had walked away and taken their testimonies public. Preston Cole had been indicted, eventually, on charges entirely unrelated to anything spiritual — a straightforward financial fraud case that had nothing to do with basements or candles and everything to do with the ordinary greed such circles seemed reliably to attract once enough money moved through them unaccountably for long enough. Ali did not celebrate his downfall, exactly, understanding by then how thoroughly grace had covered failures at least as serious as his own. But she noted it, and prayed, as she still did most weeks, that whatever remained of Corinne's circle would someday follow the same long, difficult road Wren and Beth and Diane had already walked.



"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." — Psalm 147:3

There was one more face in the crowd that night Ali had not expected, and could not, for the first several minutes after she noticed her, fully trust herself to keep speaking past.

Denise Farrow sat near the center of the sanctuary, three rows back, a woman Ali had exchanged careful, aching letters with for four of the five years since her daughter's death, a correspondence that had begun in raw grief and accusation and had slowly, over dozens of letters, become something neither of them could have predicted the first terrible week they spoke by phone — not friendship exactly, because some griefs never fully soften into anything so comfortable as friendship, but a kind of solemn, mutual keeping, two women bound forever by a single name neither of them would ever stop saying carefully.

Denise had not come to hear Ali defend herself. She had told Ali as much in her most recent letter, three months earlier: I am not coming because I have forgiven everything. Some days I have. Some days I am not sure I ever fully will, and I have made a kind of peace with that too. I am coming because Jasmine would want to know that whatever found her that night did not also get to keep you, and because some part of me needs to see, with my own eyes, that a story which took my daughter from me did not simply end in her grave. Ali had wept reading that letter for the better part of an hour, and wept again now, briefly, mid-sentence, when she found Denise's face in the crowd and saw her mouth, silently, from three rows back: keep going.

She kept going.



"Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen." — Ephesians 3:20–21

The sanctuary, when Ali finally stepped out from the wings to take her place near the podium, held every one of its nearly two thousand seats filled, the low murmur of a large, expectant crowd settling into something closer to stillness as the evening's host introduced her.

She had learned, over five years and dozens of these evenings, that the size of a room no longer changed much about how she prepared to speak in it. Whether she was sitting across a small table from one trembling stranger on a Tuesday night or standing before two thousand people in a sanctuary this size, the substance of what she had to offer remained exactly the same: not performance, not polish, simply the truth of what had happened to her, offered as plainly as she could manage, and trust that the God who had done the actual work in her over the preceding five years would do whatever work still needed doing in whoever was listening tonight.

She scanned the crowd once, briefly, before beginning, and felt her breath catch at a face in the fourth row she had not expected to see — Priya, seven months pregnant now, sitting beside a husband

Ali had married her to the previous spring, having driven three hours specifically because, she'd texted Ali the week before, I wanted our baby to hear this story before she's even born, so she grows up knowing exactly what her mother was rescued from and exactly Who did the rescuing.



"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." — Hebrews 13:8

"Five years ago tonight," Ali began, her voice carrying clear and steady out over the packed sanctuary, "I would not have been able to stand in a room like this one without my hands shaking so badly I couldn't hold a microphone. Some of you already know pieces of my story. For those who don't: I spent two years of my life inside the occult, believing I had found real power, real family, real answers to a hunger I had carried since I was a very small child. I taught thousands of people online how to practice what I practiced. A nineteen-year-old woman named Jasmine Farrow died attempting a working I taught her, and that loss remains, five years later, the deepest grief I carry and the clearest reason I am standing in front of you tonight instead of quietly living out an ordinary, private life somewhere far from any microphone."

She let the room sit with that admission for a moment, the way Pastor Mercer had once let his own hardest sentences breathe before continuing.

"I want to tell you something about the God I met on the other side of all that darkness," she said. "He is not a different God than the one who let a nine-year-old girl endure what I endured, or the one who apparently stayed silent when a fifteen-year-old begged Him, in an empty room, to explain why. I used to think those two facts were impossible to hold together — a good God, and a childhood that bad. I don't think that anymore. I think the same God who let evil men do evil things to a defenseless child was grieving that evil with a grief I could not yet imagine, and was already, even then, weaving a rescue thread through the very darkest years of my life that I would not see clearly until decades later, on a plain carpet floor, finally desperate enough to stop running from Him. Hebrews tells us Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever. He was not a different, less powerful God in that trailer at the end of Miller's Creek Road than He was in a basement forty minutes outside a small town two years ago, or than He is in this sanctuary tonight. He was always exactly this strong. I simply spent twenty-nine years looking everywhere except toward Him to prove it."



She told them the rest of it in the unhurried, unadorned cadence she had learned, over five years of Tuesday nights and conference stages, was the only cadence honest enough to carry a story this heavy — Diane's warm hands in a candle shop, a black candle guttering sideways in a windowless room, Tyler's ruined career and the electric thrill of believing something was finally listening, a basement and a bleeding page and a working name she had not spoken aloud in years. She told them about the thing that had risen at the foot of her bed and told her she belonged to it, about twenty-six sleepless nights and a blood-red faucet and scratches she had not made with her own hands. She told them about an old pastor's phone number folded soft in a jacket pocket, about a plain brick church and a woman named Ruth who had held her hands without pricing them, about the single sentence that had finally cracked two years of careful self-deception wide open: the devil doesn't love you, he never did, but Jesus died because He loves you.

"I want to say something plainly tonight that I think the enemy of every single person in this room hopes none of us ever says out loud," Ali said, and her voice, though it did not rise, seemed to carry further, the whole sanctuary gone entirely still. "He lost. He spent two years convincing me I was building a kingdom of my own when I was only ever being harvested for his. He took everything he could take from me — my safety, my sleep, very nearly my life, and, far worse than any of that, a nineteen-year-old girl who trusted me — and in the end, after all of it, after every candle and every blood signature and every threat whispered into the dark at exactly 3:11 in the morning, he still lost. He lost the moment I said one Name out loud instead of running from it one more time. He has been losing, in exactly that same way, in exactly that same single moment of surrender, for two thousand years, and he is going to keep losing until the very last soul he ever manages to deceive finally says that same Name back to Him too. Thanks be to God, Scripture tells us, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ — not a victory we win by becoming strong enough to fight him off ourselves, because I promise you, I was never that strong, not for one single day. A victory already won, two thousand years ago, on a cross the enemy himself thought was his own greatest triumph, until the third day proved it was actually the exact moment he lost everything for good."

The sanctuary broke into applause before she had even finished the sentence, two thousand voices rising together in a sound that reminded her, disorientingly and for only a moment, of thirty confident people applauding her initiation in a basement five years earlier — except this sound, she understood immediately, carried nothing of that old counterfeit warmth inside it at all. This was simply joy, plain and communal and entirely unearned by anything she had done, offered up to the only One who actually deserved it.



"Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." — Luke 15:7

She gave the altar call herself that night, at the host pastor's invitation, standing at the edge of the stage with a microphone that suddenly felt heavier in her hand than it had for the entire preceding forty minutes.

"If anything I've said tonight found its way into a room in your own life you've been too frightened to open the door on," she said, "I want you to know that room does not have to stay locked one more night. I'm not asking you to be as certain as I sound up here. I wasn't certain either, the first night I called a stranger's number with my hands shaking so badly I could barely hold the phone. I'm only asking whether you're tired enough of carrying whatever you're carrying to let someone help you set it down."

She watched, from the stage, as a handful of figures began rising throughout the vast, packed sanctuary, making their way toward the aisles with the particular unhurried courage of people who had clearly been waiting all evening for permission they hadn't quite believed they'd be given. And then, near the back of the sanctuary, in a row Ali had not been able to see clearly from the stage until the woman actually stood, she saw a face that stopped her breath entirely — a young woman, perhaps twenty-seven now, five years older than the last time Ali had glimpsed her from a distance in a hotel lobby, dropping a deck of tarot cards into a trash can one by one with no audience at all beyond a God who never once stopped watching.

Ali had never learned that young woman's name. She had thought of her often over the intervening years, had wondered, on quiet nights, whether the door she'd witnessed swinging shut that afternoon had ever led anywhere beyond a single private, unwitnessed moment of doubt. She watched her now, walking down the long aisle of Riverbend Community Church with tears streaming freely down her face, and understood, with a certainty that arrived from somewhere far beyond her own reasoning, exactly who she was looking at.



"Behold, I am making all things new." — Revelation 21:5

Her name, Ali learned twenty minutes later, standing with her in a quiet side room off the main sanctuary while the young woman's hands shook around a cup of water someone had pressed into them,

was Grace — a name, she said through tears, that her own mother had chosen without any particular religious intention behind it, and that had felt, every single day for the five years since a hotel lobby trash can, like the cruelest possible joke a universe with no God in it could have played on her.

"I kept the cards for almost a year after that day," Grace admitted, her voice raw. "I bought a new deck. I told myself throwing away the first one had just been an emotional overreaction to a conference that got in my head. But I never used the new deck the same way again. Something in me had already started leaving before I even understood what I was leaving. I've spent five years circling closer and closer to tonight without ever quite arriving at it, and then I heard you were speaking here, and I don't even fully know why I came, except that I think some part of me has been waiting five years to finish something I started throwing away in a hotel lobby and never had the courage to finish giving up."

Ali took both of Grace's hands the way Ruth had once taken hers, the way Diane had taken hers before that, a gesture that had traveled hand to hand through so many women now that Ali had long since stopped being able to trace where it had actually begun. "You don't have to explain why tonight was the night," she said. "You just have to decide whether you're ready to let it be. I promise you, on every single thing I have, that the door is real, and it opens all the way, and whatever you've spent five years almost throwing away can be fully, finally gone tonight, if you're ready."

"Can I tell you the rest of it?" Grace asked, before they prayed, wiping her eyes with the back of one trembling hand. "I don't think I've ever told anyone the whole thing out loud."

Ali nodded, and listened, recognizing with an ache the shape of her own story rendered in a stranger's specific details — a father who left when Grace was eight, a mother who worked three jobs and was rarely present enough to notice her daughter's growing fascination with the mystical corners of the internet, a first tarot reading at a college friend's apartment that had felt, Grace said, like being seen for the first time in her life. She had never gone as deep as Ali once had, had never joined a circle, had never signed anything in blood — but she had spent five years since that conference in a strange, suspended half-life, dabbling and retreating, buying new decks and hiding them, feeling the same old hunger pull her back every time she managed to walk away from it for a few months.

"I kept thinking I'd know when I was really ready," Grace said. "Like there'd be some obvious sign. But tonight I just sat in my seat and thought, I have been circling this exact same doorway for five years, and nothing about tonight is more obviously a sign than any other night, except that I'm finally tired enough to stop waiting for one."

"That's not a smaller kind of readiness than a sign would be," Ali told her gently. "That's exactly what mine looked like too. I didn't get a voice from heaven, Grace. I got twenty-six sleepless nights and enough exhaustion to finally dial a number I'd been too proud to dial for weeks. Tired is a perfectly good place to start from. It's the only place most of us ever actually do start from."

Grace prayed with her right there in that small side room, haltingly at first and then with gathering, astonished conviction, the same raw, unrehearsed words Ali herself had once spoken on a plain carpet floor five years earlier — and when she finally lifted her head, tears still falling but her whole face changed, lighter, unburdened in a way Ali recognized immediately because she had once felt the exact same lightness herself, Ali understood that she was witnessing, with her own eyes, the precise mechanism Pastor Mercer had once described to her on their very first phone call: a single thread of mercy, stretched across decades and dozens of hands, from Loretta to Pastor Mercer to Ali to a hotel lobby trash can to a packed sanctuary five years later, still finding new hands to place itself into every single time the old hands grew tired.



"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." — Matthew 28:19–20

Ali drove home that night with Josiah beside her, the sanctuary lights long behind them, the whole strange arithmetic of the evening settling slowly into something she suspected she would still be turning over in her mind for weeks to come.

"You're quiet," Josiah said, somewhere past the county line, echoing almost exactly the question Ruth had once asked her on a different drive, years earlier.

"I keep thinking about something Pastor Mercer told me tonight," Ali said. "That he's watched a lot of women walk into his office over the years, frightened and certain they'd gone too far. And that he'd never watched one turn what she survived into as much fruit as I have." She was quiet for a moment, watching the dark fields slide past the window. "I used to think my two years in the occult were the worst thing that would ever define me. The thing I'd spend the rest of my life trying to outrun or apologize for. I don't think that anymore. I think God took the very worst chapter of my entire life — genuinely the worst, Josiah, the chapter I am the most ashamed of, out of every single thing I have ever done — and turned it into the exact instrument He's used to reach women like Grace, women like Priya, women like Wren and Beth and even Diane. I spent two years being Satan's most effective recruiter without knowing that's what I was. I've spent five years since finding out that the same platform, the same story, the same scars, can be turned completely around and used for exactly the opposite purpose, if you're willing to hand the whole ugly, humiliating truth of it over to Someone who knows exactly what to do with wreckage."

"That's the whole gospel in one sentence," Josiah said quietly. "Isn't it. Not that He erases the wreckage. That He builds with it."



"Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy!" — Psalm 126:5

Ali did not know, driving home that night, everything the years still ahead of her would hold — did not know that Grace would join the Tuesday night group within the month, and would, three years later, be the one holding a trembling stranger's hands across that same round table, the thread continuing exactly the way it always had, one exhausted set of hands passing it to the next. She did not know how many more sanctuaries she would eventually stand in, how many more names she would learn to say slowly enough that no one in the room could mistake them for anything less than a debt still being faithfully repaid.

She knew only what she had always, eventually, come back to knowing, on every hard night and every unexpectedly holy one since a stranger's phone number had once saved her life: that the God who had let a six-year-old lie in a ditch behind a trailer, who had seemed silent through every year that followed, who had waited, with a patience she still could not fully comprehend, through a candle shop and a basement and a bleeding page and a haunting that had very nearly ended her, had never once actually been absent. He had been building, the entire time, out of every single year the locusts had eaten, a testimony sturdy enough to carry not just her own weight back out of the pit, but the weight of every other woman who would ever need to grab hold of the same rope on her own way up.

Satan had found, in a grieving twenty-nine-year-old walking into a candle shop on a rainy September Saturday, exactly what he always looks for: a hungry, wounded heart he assumed he could use up and discard the moment it stopped being useful to him.

He had lost her instead.

He had lost her to the One who had been standing at the door the entire time, patient beyond every patience she had ever known, waiting for a woman who thought herself too far gone to ever be called anything but Satan's side chick to finally understand what she had actually been, all along, underneath every lie that had ever been told to her about her own worth: not chosen for darkness at all, but simply, completely, irrevocably beloved.

Epilogue – Redeemed Forever

"For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." — Colossians 1:13–14

If you have read this far, you have walked with me through a trailer at the end of Miller's Creek Road, a candle shop that smelled like sandalwood and smoke, a basement forty minutes outside a town I still won't name, and a plain carpet floor at the front of a small brick church where a broken woman finally said the only words that had ever actually mattered. I did not write this story so that you would feel sorry for me. I wrote it because I spent two years believing a lie so convincing it very nearly cost me my life, and I would rather spend the rest of mine warning you plainly than let one more woman walk the same road simply because no one who survived it was willing to say so out loud.

I want to say a few last things to you directly, reader to reader, before I let you go.



"I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." — Isaiah 43:1

The first thing is this: what I experienced was real. I know how strange that sentence sounds sitting inside the pages of a novel, but I did not invent the hunger that sent me looking, and I did not invent the darkness that answered when I finally called out into it. The occult is not a harmless hobby, and it is not a neutral spiritual practice equal to any other. It is a door, and something patient and hungry waits on the other side of it, and it does not love the people who walk through. It uses them. If any part of Ali's story landed close to something in your own life — a candle, a card, a circle you've told yourself is just for fun, a voice you've mistaken for guidance — I am asking you, as plainly and as urgently as I know how, to take that seriously before it costs you what it very nearly cost me.

The second thing is this: whatever you have already done cannot out-run what Christ has already finished. I know the shame that keeps a person silent. I carried it myself for two long years, certain that what I had done in that basement had placed me permanently beyond rescue, that some sins were simply too dark and too deliberate for grace to reach. I was wrong. Colossians tells us Christ has already rescued us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us into His kingdom — not might rescue, not will rescue if you clean yourself up first, but has rescued, already, two thousand years ago, a debt paid in full before you or I ever existed to owe it. Isaiah tells us God calls us by name and claims

us as His own, not because we earned the claim, but because He simply decided, before the foundation of the world, that we were worth it.



"Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." — Romans 10:13

If you are reading this and some part of you recognizes yourself in these pages — the hunger, the loneliness, the door you've been circling for months or years without quite walking through it, or the door you've already walked through and don't know how to walk back out of — I want to tell you exactly what I wish someone had told me sooner: you do not have to fix yourself before you come to Him. You do not have to understand everything, or believe perfectly, or have a single dramatic moment of certainty before it counts. You only have to be willing to say His name instead of running from it one more time.

If you want to, right now, in whatever room you're sitting in as you read this, you can pray something like this:

Jesus, I don't fully understand everything about who You are, but I am tired of carrying this alone. I confess that I have looked for life and power and belonging in places that could never actually give them to me. I believe You died for me anyway, and that You rose again, and that You are stronger than anything I have ever been afraid of. I am asking You to rescue me the way You rescued Ali. Take what I've been carrying. I want to belong to You instead.

That is not a magic formula. It is simply honesty, spoken to Someone who has been waiting, patiently, for you to finally speak it.



"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." — Psalm 147:3

If you prayed that prayer, or something like it, please do not try to walk what comes next alone. Find a church — a plain one, if you can, the kind with an out-of-tune piano and people who sing badly and mean every word of it. Tell one honest person what you just did. Ask for help finding a Bible and someone willing to read it alongside you. The isolation that kept me trapped for two years was not an accident; it was the exact tool a patient enemy used to keep me from the very community that eventually saved my life. Do not let him use it on you too.

If you are a mother, or a father, or a sister, or a friend, reading this because you're frightened for someone you love the way my aunt Carol was once frightened for me — keep calling. Keep showing up. Keep telling the truth gently and refusing to disappear even when you're pushed away. I did not come home because someone gave up on me. I came home because enough people refused to.



"And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life." — 1 John 2:25

The title of this book was never meant to be comfortable, and I hope, if nothing else about these pages, that discomfort has done its work in you. I spent two years believing I had found power. What I had actually found was a cage with a very convincing paint job. It was only when I finally cried out for something outside of myself that I discovered what real freedom felt like — not the absence of struggle, because the struggle continued long after that night on the carpet floor, but the absence of ownership by anything except the One who died to have me.

Jasmine Farrow never got the chance to read a book like this one. I think about her more than I think about almost anything else, and I will keep saying her name, in every room I am ever given a microphone in, for as long as I live. If her story, folded inside mine, keeps even one more woman from walking the same road to the same ending, then some small redemptive thread has been pulled through a loss that otherwise makes no sense at all.

I am redeemed. Not temporarily, not conditionally, not until I make one more mistake serious enough to void the contract — redeemed forever, the way Scripture promises, the way no working I ever performed and no candle I ever burned could have promised me in two straining, exhausting years of trying. Satan promised me power and gave me chains dressed up as gifts. Jesus asked for nothing but my surrender and gave me a life I do not deserve and could never have earned on my own.

If you take nothing else from these pages, take this: the door out is real. It opens all the way. And whoever is holding it open on the other side has never once, in the whole history of every soul who has ever reached for Him, changed His mind about wanting you home.

— Ali Gibson

A Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

Thank you for taking the time to read **Satan's Side Chick**. My prayer is that this story has done more than entertain you—that it has reminded you of the incredible grace of God and the victorious power of Jesus Christ.

Although Ali Gibson is a fictional character, the spiritual realities portrayed throughout this novel are very real. Every day, countless people search for meaning, purpose, identity, and power in places that can never satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart. Some seek fulfillment through wealth, relationships, success, or pleasure. Others turn to spiritual practices that promise enlightenment, control, or hidden knowledge. Yet every path that leads away from God ultimately leads to disappointment and bondage.

The Bible tells us that Satan is "the father of lies." His greatest weapon has never been obvious evil but subtle deception. He disguises darkness as light, bondage as freedom, and rebellion as independence. He offers temporary pleasure while concealing the devastating consequences that follow.

But this is not where the story ends.

The greatest truth of the Christian faith is not that sin is powerful—it is that the grace of God is greater.

Jesus Christ entered our broken world to seek and save the lost. Through His perfect life, sacrificial death on the cross, and glorious resurrection, He defeated sin, death, and the powers of darkness. His invitation remains the same today as it was two thousand years ago: "Come to Me."

No one is beyond His reach.

No past is too dark.

No addiction is too strong.

No chain is too heavy.

No heart is too broken.

If God can transform a persecutor like Saul into the Apostle Paul, restore Peter after his denial, and redeem people throughout history who had wandered far from Him, He can redeem anyone who turns to Him in repentance and faith.

Perhaps as you read Ali's story, you recognized pieces of your own. Maybe your struggle is not with witchcraft but with fear, bitterness, pride, addiction, materialism, or another burden that has kept you from experiencing the peace God desires for you. Whatever your story may be, the answer is not found in self-improvement or religious performance. It is found in a relationship with Jesus Christ.

If you have never placed your faith in Him, I encourage you to open the Scriptures and discover who He truly is. Read the Gospels. Consider His claims. Reflect on His sacrifice. Ask Him to reveal Himself to you. God delights in drawing near to those who sincerely seek Him.

For those who already know Christ, I pray this novel has strengthened your confidence in the truth that our Savior is greater than every force of darkness. We do not live in fear because we belong to the One who has already won the victory.

Never underestimate what God can do through one surrendered life.

Ali Gibson's story may be fictional, but the God who redeems, restores, and transforms is not.

May your faith be strengthened, your hope renewed, and your heart continually drawn to the Savior who came "to proclaim liberty to the captives" and to give abundant life.

Thank you for allowing me to share this journey with you. It is my sincere prayer that long after you close this book, you will remember one unchanging truth:

The enemy may write chapters of deception, but Jesus Christ writes the final chapter of redemption.

May God richly bless you and your family.

Soli Deo Gloria—To God Alone Be the Glory.

In Christ's Service,

Dr. Paul Crawford

Author and Bible Teacher

Crawford Bible Commentary

<https://www.crawfordbiblecommentary.com/>

SHE SOUGHT POWER IN THE DARKNESS. SHE FOUND FREEDOM IN THE LIGHT.

Ali Gibson had everything she thought she wanted—popularity, a growing following, and the kind of power most people only dream about. But it came at a price. When curiosity led her into the world of witchcraft, she discovered forces far more real—and far more dangerous—than she ever imagined.

What began as harmless exploration soon became an all-consuming obsession. Spells. Rituals. Spirit guides. A secret coven. The deeper Ali went, the more influence she gained... and the more her soul was enslaved.

Behind closed doors, darkness whispered lies. Nightmares became normal. Fear became her constant companion. And the enemy who promised to empower her used her, controlled her, and nearly destroyed her.

But God had not given up on her. Through unexpected encounters, relentless prayer, and the unshakable truth of the Gospel, Ali discovered that **the cross is stronger than any curse—and that Jesus Christ came to set the captives free.**

Satan's Side Chick is a gripping and powerful story of spiritual deception, breaking generational strongholds, and the life-changing redemption found only in Jesus Christ. It is a raw, unfiltered journey from bondage to freedom—and a testimony that no one is too far gone for the saving grace of God.

THE DEVIL PROMISED HER POWER. JESUS GAVE HER LIFE.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Paul Crawford is an author, pastor, and Bible teacher with a passion for equipping believers and reaching the lost with the transformative power of the Gospel. With more than three decades of ministry experience, he has preached and taught in churches, conferences, and communities around the world.

Dr. Crawford's heart is to see lives changed by the truth of God's Word and the hope found in Jesus Christ. Through his writing, he seeks to inspire faith, encourage spiritual growth, and shine light into the darkest places of the human heart.

He lives in the United States with his family and continues to serve in ministry full-time.

