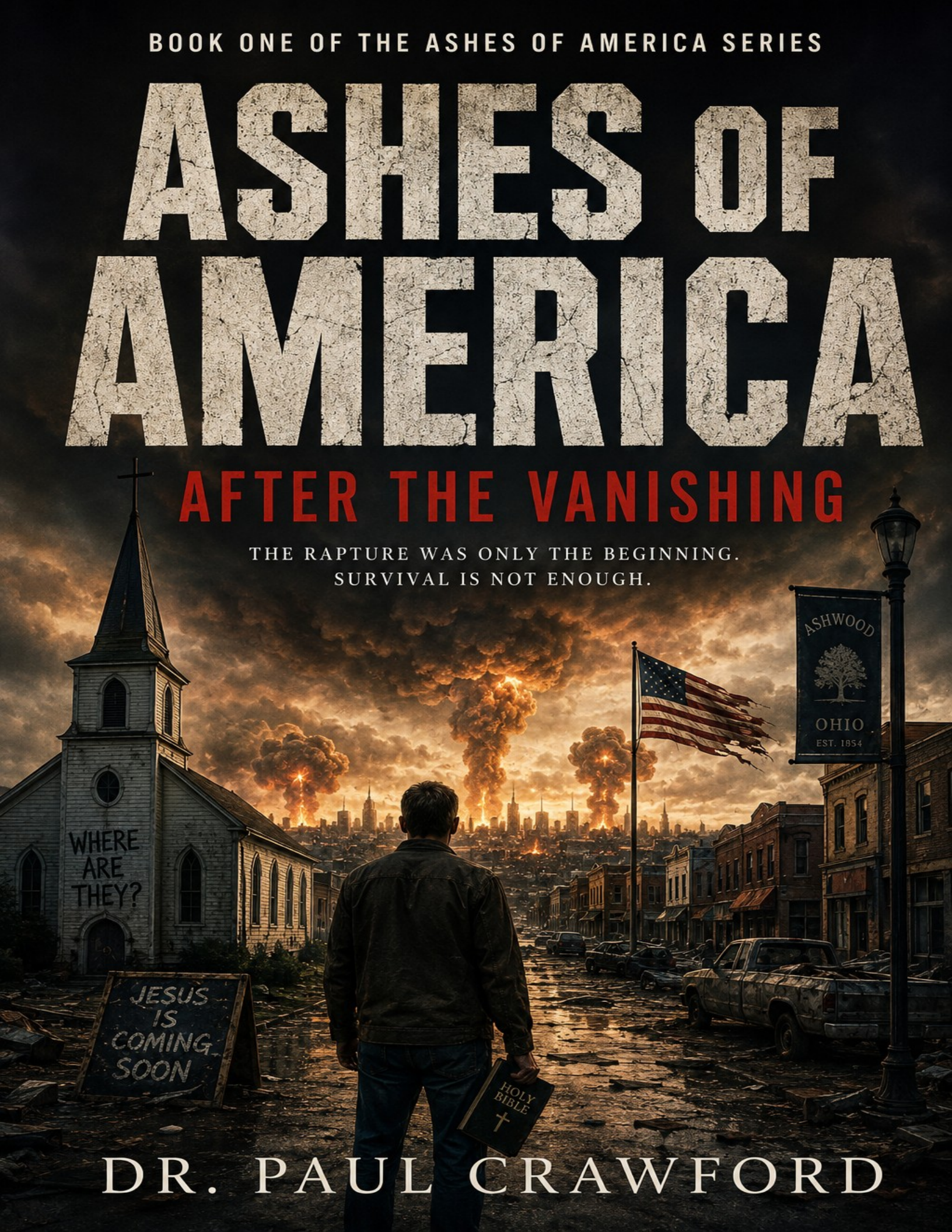
BOOK ONE OF THE ASHES OF AMERICA SERIES

ASHES OF AMERICA

AFTER THE VANISHING

THE RAPTURE WAS ONLY THE BEGINNING.
SURVIVAL IS NOT ENOUGH.



DR. PAUL CRAWFORD

ASHES OF AMERICA: AFTER THE VANISHING

Book One of the Ashes of America Series

By Dr. Paul Crawford

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Preface

There are moments in history that forever change the course of civilization.

The attack on Pearl Harbor.

The assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

These events altered nations, shaped generations, and reminded us that life can change in an instant.

But what if there were a day unlike any other in human history?

A day when millions of people simply disappeared.

A day when families were torn apart without warning.

A day when airplanes fell from the sky, highways became graveyards of twisted steel, hospitals descended into chaos, and every explanation offered by humanity failed to answer the one question echoing around the globe:

"Where did they go?"

For followers of Jesus Christ, the answer is found not in science, politics, or conspiracy, but in the unchanging Word of God.

The Bible speaks of a coming day when Jesus Christ will call His Church home. Believers throughout history have eagerly anticipated this event, commonly known as the Rapture. While sincere Christians differ on the timing of future prophetic events, this novel is written from a pre-Tribulation perspective, imagining the world immediately after the Church has been taken to be with Christ.

Ashes of America: After the Vanishing is a work of fiction.

The characters are fictional.

The town of Ashwood, Ohio, is fictional.

The events, conversations, and relationships portrayed throughout these pages are products of the imagination.

Yet the biblical truths that form the foundation of this story are drawn from Scripture and reflect the hope of Christ's return, the reality of God's coming judgment, and the promise of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

This novel is not intended to predict dates, identify modern nations with certainty, or claim that future events will unfold exactly as depicted. Instead, it seeks to explore one possible scenario through the eyes of ordinary people living in a small American town as they face extraordinary circumstances.

Rather than focusing on presidents, generals, or world leaders, this story follows neighbors, first responders, farmers, teachers, doctors, and pastors—people who could easily be our own family members or friends. Their fears, failures, victories, and growing faith remind us that history is not only shaped by those in positions of power but also by ordinary individuals who choose courage when the world around them collapses.

At its heart, this is not merely a story about catastrophe.

It is a story about conviction.

It is a story about redemption.

It is a story about hope.

Even in the darkest days imaginable, God has not abandoned His people.

Even when nations crumble, His promises stand.

Even when evil appears to triumph, Jesus Christ remains King.

My prayer is that this novel will do more than entertain. I hope it will encourage believers to live with expectancy, challenge readers to consider the claims of Christ, and remind each of us that life is fragile, eternity is real, and the invitation of the gospel is available today.

If these pages cause you to reflect more deeply on God's Word, to cherish the hope found in Jesus Christ, or to examine your own relationship with Him, then this story will have accomplished far more than simply telling an exciting tale.

Thank you for joining me on this journey into the world of **Ashes of America**.

May it strengthen your faith, deepen your hope, and point your heart toward the One who has promised,

> "Surely I come quickly."

And may every reader be able to answer with the words of the Apostle John:

> **"Even so, come, Lord Jesus."**
> —Revelation 22:20

Dr. Paul Crawford

Prologue

Tuesday

3:16 p.m.

The town of Ashwood, Ohio, had no idea it was living through the final sixty seconds of the Church Age.

Life was ordinary.

The bell had just rung at Ashwood High School, and students poured into the parking lot laughing, talking about baseball practice, homework, and weekend plans.

Traffic crawled through downtown as commuters hurried home from work.

At Whitaker's Diner, the lunch crowd lingered over coffee while waitresses refilled mugs and discussed the weather forecast.

Across town, children laughed on the swings at Memorial Park.

Farmers drove combines across golden fields that had been in their families for generations.

The world seemed perfectly normal.

It was anything but.

Pastor Caleb Whitfield closed his Bible and smiled.

The sanctuary of Ashwood Baptist Church was empty except for him.

Tuesday afternoons were always quiet.

He glanced at the notes lying beside his Bible.

That evening's Bible study was titled:

"The Blessed Hope."

He chuckled softly.

"I suppose that's appropriate," he whispered.

He had spent nearly forty years preaching about the return of Jesus Christ.

Many believed.

Many did not.

Some mocked him openly.

Others simply smiled politely and changed the subject.

But Caleb never stopped preaching.

He believed every word of Scripture.

Every promise.

Every prophecy.

Every warning.

Especially this one.

"For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout..."

He looked out the church window toward Main Street.

People hurried from one appointment to another.

Most had no thought of eternity.

His heart broke for them.

He bowed his head.

"Lord...if today is the day...please save one more."

Across town...

Former Police Lieutenant Ethan Walker leaned against his patrol truck outside the Ashwood Police Department.

Retirement hadn't suited him.

He now worked part-time as the town's emergency management coordinator.

He checked his watch.

Three sixteen.

Almost time to head home.

His wife Emily had texted earlier.

Don't forget milk.

He smiled.

She always remembered the little things.

Their seven-year-old daughter, Lily, had asked if he would be home in time to help build her science project.

He intended to.

At Ashwood Community Hospital...

Dr. Sarah Collins completed another successful surgery.

She peeled off her gloves.

Another life saved.

Another twelve-hour shift nearly finished.

One of the nurses smiled.

"See you tomorrow."

Sarah nodded.

"Lord willing."

The nurse laughed.

Sarah did not.

She didn't believe in God.

Never had.

Jack Reynolds tightened the last bolt on a tractor outside his barn.

The former Army Ranger wiped grease from his hands.

The quiet countryside was exactly why he had returned home after years overseas.

No more war.

No more explosions.

No more death.

Ashwood was peaceful.

Safe.

Or so he believed.

Rebecca Whitfield sat in a downtown coffee shop grading elementary school papers.

She loved her father.

She admired his kindness.

But she had grown tired of hearing him talk about Bible prophecy.

"The Rapture."

"The Tribulation."

"The end times."

She had heard it all her life.

Yet life kept going.

Nothing ever changed.

She sipped her coffee and smiled to herself.

Dad worries too much.

At Memorial Park...

Noah Simmons tossed a football with his best friend.

His parents had invited him to church every Sunday.

Every Wednesday.

Every revival.

Every youth retreat.

He always had an excuse.

Maybe later.

Maybe someday.

There was plenty of time.

Or so he thought.

Across America...

Millions of believers were quietly living ordinary lives.

Teachers.

Truck drivers.

Doctors.

Construction workers.

Mechanics.

Grandmothers.

Missionaries.

Factory workers.

Farmers.

No one noticed anything unusual.

No warning sirens sounded.

No government alert flashed across television screens.

No scientist predicted what was about to happen.

Heaven, however, was preparing.

The Father's promise was about to be fulfilled.

The Son was about to call His bride home.

The angels waited in anticipation.

Three seventeen.

A mother buckled her infant into a car seat.

Then...

She was gone.

A commercial airliner lost both Christian pilots.

An interstate became a graveyard of twisted metal as thousands of drivers vanished behind the wheel.

Operating rooms erupted in panic.

School classrooms fell silent.

Church offices stood empty.

Choir robes fluttered to the floor.

Wedding rings clattered onto sidewalks.

Eyeglasses fell onto church pews.

Open Bibles lay abandoned.

Pastor Caleb Whitfield disappeared while kneeling in prayer.

Emily Walker vanished from the dairy aisle of Miller's Market.

Little Lily Walker disappeared from her second-grade classroom.

Hundreds of people throughout Ashwood simply ceased to exist.

Not dead.

Gone.

For several long seconds...

The entire world stood frozen.

Then came the screaming.

Car horns.

Explosions.

Sirens.

Fire.

Confusion.

Panic.

Within minutes, every phone network was overwhelmed.

Television stations abandoned regular programming.

No one had answers.

Governments demanded calm.

Scientists searched for explanations.

Religious leaders offered theories.

Social media exploded with speculation.

But none of them understood what had happened.

Not yet.

As darkness settled over the stunned nation, military radar operators detected something even more terrifying.

Missiles.

Hundreds of them.

Racing across oceans toward the United States.

The greatest catastrophe in human history had only begun.

The disappearance of millions was merely the opening act.

Before the sun rose again...

America would burn.

And the little town of Ashwood, Ohio...

...would never be the same.

Part One — The Day the World Changed

ASHES OF AMERICA — BOOK ONE AFTER THE VANISHING by Dr. Paul Crawford

CHAPTER ONE

A Normal Tuesday

"But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only... Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come." — Matthew 24:36, 42 (KJV)

Ashwood, Ohio did not know it was living its last ordinary day.

The town sat in a shallow bowl of farmland forty minutes south of Mansfield, where Route 9 crossed the old B&O rail line and nobody had bothered to change the crossing gate in thirty years. Corn stood shoulder-high in the fields ringing the town, still green-gold in the July heat, and the creek that gave Ashwood Creek Park its name ran low and lazy under the stone bridge on Miller Road. From the water tower — ASHWOOD, painted in fading blue letters, home of the Wildcats — you could see the whole town at once: the square with its Civil War cannon and its gazebo, the grain elevator rising over Co-op Row, three white church steeples and one brick one, and beyond them, the long green quilt of Richland County stitched together by fence lines and gravel roads.

It was a Tuesday in July, and Ashwood was doing what it always did on a Tuesday in July. The diner on Main Street was serving its lunch special to the same six farmers who ordered it every day. The Ashwood Gazette's presses, half its usual size since the paper went to twice-weekly, were readying Thursday's edition. Somewhere behind the middle school, sprinklers hissed over a football field being prepped for two-a-days that wouldn't start for another month. It was the kind of day nobody would remember, in a town nobody outside Richland County had ever heard of — except that before this day ended, no one on earth would ever call it ordinary again.

None of them knew. That was the mercy of it, if mercy is the word. They ate their breakfasts. They argued about nothing. They kissed their families goodbye at the door as if there would always be another door, another goodbye, another Tuesday.

There would not be.

I. The Pastor

Caleb Whitfield had been awake since five-forty, which was nothing unusual; he had risen at five-forty every day for thirty-one years, ever since his first church, a clapboard building outside Dayton with eleven members and a leaking roof. He made coffee in the same percolator he'd owned since Reagan's second term, poured it black into a mug that said WORLD'S OKAYEST FISHERMAN — a gift from a deacon who had long since passed on — and carried it into the small room off the parsonage kitchen that he still called his study, though Margaret used to call it his cave.

Margaret had been gone six years now. Cancer, slow and then sudden, the way it so often was. Caleb still set two coffee cups out some mornings before he caught himself. He didn't consider this sad

anymore. He considered it love with nowhere left to go but memory and prayer, and he figured the Lord didn't mind him talking to an empty chair if it kept his heart soft.

This particular Tuesday, he had his Bible open to Luke 17, and he was building his notes for that evening's Wednesday-eve — no, he corrected himself, chuckling — for tonight's Tuesday night Bible study, the smaller gathering he'd started for the folks who couldn't make Wednesdays. Nineteen people, give or take, crowded into the fellowship hall of Ashwood Community Baptist Church, and Caleb loved every one of them the way a man loves a garden he has weeded with his own hands for three decades.

He read aloud, the way he always did, his voice filling the small room the same as it filled the sanctuary on Sundays. *"And as it was in the days of Noe, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man. They did eat, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, and the flood came, and destroyed them all... I tell you, in that night there shall be two men in one bed; the one shall be taken, and the other shall be left."*

He'd preached this passage a hundred times across his ministry. Tonight, though, something about it sat differently in his chest — not fear, nothing so dramatic as that, just a weight, a nearness, the way a man feels a storm coming before the sky has changed color. He set his pen down and prayed instead, right there at his desk, for the church, for the deacons, for the widow Alma Ferris who'd missed two Sundays now with her hip, and — as he did every single day, twice a day, sometimes more — for Rebecca.

Lord, soften her heart. You know I've said everything I know how to say. I'm out of words, Father. Do what I cannot.

He thought, not for the first time, that he had failed her somehow — that a preacher who could lead strangers to the foot of the cross should have been able to walk his own daughter there. But grace didn't work by bloodline, he reminded himself, only by faith, and faith was not his to give her. Only God's.

Before he left for his hospital visits that morning, Caleb did something he did most Mondays but rarely on a Tuesday: he sat in front of the little camcorder on its tripod in the corner of the study — a gift from the youth group two Christmases back, half joke, half genuine hope that "Pastor might reach folks on the YouTube" — and he recorded a short message. He did this most weeks now, uploading them to the church's barely-used website, more out of stubborn faithfulness than any real sense that anyone watched them.

"Church family," he said into the small black lens, "if you're seeing this and you weren't at Bible study Tuesday, I want you to hear something I believe with my whole heart. The Lord is coming back. Maybe not today. Maybe not this year. But He is coming, and when He comes, there will be no time to decide what you believe. The decision has to be made *before.* So today — hear me — today is the day of salvation."

He looked at the little red light for a long moment, the way he always did, feeling faintly foolish talking to a machine, and then he said what he always said to close: "I love you all. I'll see you Sunday — Lord willing."

He had no idea how true those last three words were about to become, nor how many people, weeks from now, would find that video and watch it with tears running down their faces, wishing beyond anything in the world that they had listened the first time.

He saved the file, grabbed his hospital-visit list off the refrigerator, and drove his fourteen-year-old Buick out of the parsonage driveway at 9:12 a.m., completely unaware that this would be the last sermon he would ever preach on earth.

II. The Lieutenant

Six blocks away, in the kitchen of a modest ranch house on Sycamore Lane, Ethan Walker was losing an argument with a six-year-old about waffles.

"Two," Grace informed him, holding up the correct number of fingers with the solemnity of a Supreme Court justice. "Not one. Two."

"You didn't finish the first one."

"I'm *saving* it."

Ethan looked to his wife for backup and found none; Emily was leaning against the counter with her coffee, watching the negotiation with poorly concealed amusement, her Bible open beside the fruit bowl to whatever she'd been reading before the waffle summit convened. "She's got you there, Lieutenant," Emily said. "Cross-examination's over."

"I outrank both of you," Ethan said, and put a second waffle on his daughter's plate anyway.

It was a good morning, an ordinary morning, the kind that made up the actual substance of Ethan Walker's life even though he spent his working hours dealing with the town's occasional worst moments — a DUI on Route 9, a domestic call out past the fairgrounds, kids vandalizing the water tower. Twelve years with the Ashwood Police Department, the last three as lieutenant, and Ethan had built a life he was, if he was honest with himself, quietly proud of: a wife who loved him more than he sometimes felt he deserved, a daughter who thought he hung the moon, a house with a mortgage he could actually afford. It was not a complicated life. He liked it that way.

The one recurring friction in the Walker household — and it was not really a fight, more a low, patient current running under twelve years of marriage — was church. Emily went every Sunday, rain or shine, and had for as long as Ethan had known her; she'd been raised in Ashwood Community Baptist, baptized in the creek behind it at age nine, and she never missed a service unless one of them was running a fever. Ethan drove her and Grace most Sundays and used the hour to sit in the truck with coffee and the sports section, or sometimes just sat in the back pew with his arms crossed, present in body, absent in every way that mattered.

"You could come in today," Emily said, not for the first time, and not with any real hope of a different answer. It wasn't even Sunday; it was just something she said sometimes, testing the door to see if it had moved.

"I was in a bad mood at seven this morning about waffles," Ethan said. "I don't think I'm cathedral material."

"It's a fellowship hall, not a cathedral. And you're plenty of things I don't think you give yourself credit for."

He kissed the top of her head on his way to the coffee pot, which was as close as he generally came to conceding the point. It wasn't that Ethan Walker hated God, exactly — he'd have said, if pressed, that he simply didn't see the evidence for one. He'd been to the scenes police officers get called to: overdoses in the Sunoco bathroom, a farmhouse fire that took a family of four two winters back, a nineteen-year-old who didn't make the curve out on Kessler Road doing sixty in a rainstorm. If there was a God up there running things, Ethan had privately concluded a long time ago, He was either powerless or He didn't care to intervene, and Ethan wasn't in the business of worshiping either kind.

He never said this to Emily in those words. He loved her too much to make her carry the weight of his doubt on top of her own faith, and some small, stubborn corner of him — the same corner that made him a good cop, the part that couldn't stand an unanswered question — kept turning the matter over anyway, quietly, at three in the morning sometimes, without ever landing anywhere.

"Daddy, are you coming to my swim lesson?" Grace asked around a mouthful of waffle.

"Four o'clock, right? I'll be there. Front row. I'll embarrass you by cheering too loud."

"You *always* do that."

"That's the job description of dad." He checked his watch — 7:41 — and stood, buttoning his uniform shirt. "I gotta run, Chief wants everybody in for a briefing this morning. Something about the county doing an active-shooter drill at the high school next month, wants us coordinated with the sheriff's department."

"Boring cop stuff," Emily said, smiling.

"The most boring cop stuff in America. Ashwood's crime wave, everybody. Watch out." He kissed Grace's syrupy forehead, kissed Emily properly, lingering just slightly longer than he needed to, the way he still did after nine years of marriage because some habits are worth keeping.

"Love you," Emily said. "I'll be praying for you today."

"You pray for me every day."

"Somebody's got to." She said it lightly, a joke worn smooth by repetition, and neither of them had any way of knowing it was the truest thing either of them would say all day.

He backed the truck out of the driveway at 7:52 a.m. and did not look back at the house, because there was no reason to. There would be a swim lesson at four. There would be dinner at six. There would be another Tuesday, and then a Wednesday, stretching out ahead of him in the comfortable, unremarkable way that days had always stretched out ahead of Ethan Walker, for his entire life, right up until they didn't.

III. The Doctor

Sarah Collins had not slept enough, which was not news; she had not slept enough in any meaningful sense since she'd started her attending position at Ashwood Regional Medical Center fourteen months ago. She drank her second coffee of the morning standing at the nurses' station, scrolling through overnight labs on a work-issued tablet with the particular bleary focus of someone who had learned, over eight years of training, to function on determination alone.

Ashwood Regional was small — sixty-two beds, a level-three trauma designation that mostly meant they stabilized the bad ones and shipped them to Mansfield or Columbus — but Sarah had chosen it deliberately, over three more prestigious offers, because she'd grown up forty minutes from here in a town not unlike it, and something about the rhythm of small-hospital medicine felt more honest to her than the machinery of a big academic center. Here, you knew your patients' names. Sometimes you'd delivered their children. Sometimes you'd gone to high school with their mothers.

"Rough night?" Dana Pruitt asked, sliding a chart across the counter. Dana was the ER's senior nurse, fifty-three years old, had worked this floor for two decades, and possessed the specific, unhurried competence Sarah had come to rely on more than she'd ever admit out loud.

"Fender bender at two, chest pain that turned out to be reflux at four, and a kid who ate a magnet at five-thirty," Sarah said. "Living the dream."

"You believe in luck, Dr. Collins?"

"I believe in probability distributions."

Dana laughed the way she always laughed at that particular joke, which Sarah had made in some form or another at least a dozen times since she'd arrived. It was, in its way, an accurate summary of Sarah Collins's entire worldview. She had been raised, nominally, Methodist — her mother still went most Sundays, back in Bucyrus — but somewhere between her first anatomy lab and her third year of residency, watching a nineteen-year-old die of a gunshot wound despite every single thing medicine could throw at him, Sarah had quietly concluded that the universe ran on chemistry and chance, not providence, and that prayer was, at best, a coping mechanism for people who needed one. She didn't begrudge anyone their faith. She simply didn't share it, and she'd stopped bothering to explain why sometime around her mother's fourth attempt to get her to "just come to church, once, for me."

What Sarah believed in was evidence. She believed in the steady, provable competence of her own two hands, in labs and imaging and the scientific method, in the fact that when a body was broken, it responded to specific, predictable interventions regardless of what anyone prayed over it. It was a tidy worldview, and it had served her well enough — through medical school, through a broken engagement in her third year of residency, through the low-grade exhaustion that was simply the price of the work she'd chosen. She was twenty-nine years old and she believed, if she believed in anything, that she had the world figured out about as well as it could be figured out.

Mid-morning brought a lull, and Sarah used it to check in on the surgical floor, where Dr. Marcus Chen — a soft-spoken general surgeon who'd been at Ashwood Regional even longer than Dana, and who

happened, Sarah knew, to be one of the more devout Christians on staff, always with a little worn Gideon's New Testament in his lab coat pocket — was prepping for a routine gallbladder removal.

"You heading into the OR?" Sarah asked, leaning in the scrub room doorway.

"Cholecystectomy at eleven-thirty," Marcus said. "Should be quick. You want to observe? I know general surgery's not your thing, but it's good for the ER folks to see what happens after you punt a patient upstairs."

"Maybe. I've got a stack of charts calling my name first."

"Suit yourself." He smiled at her, kind and unhurried the way he always was, a man entirely comfortable in his own skin. "You know, Sarah, one of these Sundays—"

"I know, I know. One of these Sundays." She held up a hand, smiling despite herself; Marcus's invitations had become something between a running joke and a genuine, patient hope, and she'd learned there was no offense in them, only care. "Go remove somebody's gallbladder, Doctor."

She had no way of knowing, as she walked back down the hallway toward the ER, that she would in fact be standing in that operating room in a matter of hours — not as an observer out of curiosity, but as the physician forced to make sense of the impossible, watching Marcus Chen's hands, gloved and mid-incision, simply cease to exist around a scalpel that clattered, empty, onto sterile drapes where a man had been standing one half-second before.

That was still hours away. For now, Sarah Collins finished her coffee, picked up her tablet, and went back to work, entirely certain of a universe that was, at that moment, less than six hours from being rewritten.

IV. The Ranger

Out past the county line, where Miller Road turned to gravel and then to dirt before it reached the tree line, Jack Reynolds was replacing a fence post that didn't need replacing, on a farm that had been his grandfather's and was now, in some complicated legal sense Jack still hadn't fully sorted out, his.

He'd come back to Ashwood four years ago, after his second discharge — the first had been temporary, a stateside recovery from a leg wound outside Kandahar; the second had been permanent, the Army's polite way of saying a man had given enough. Jack Reynolds had spent eleven years as an Army Ranger, had led men into rooms where the wrong decision meant somebody didn't come home, and had made, on one particular night in a village whose name he still would not say out loud, a decision that he had turned over in his mind roughly four thousand times since. Two men under his command had died that night, following an order he gave. He had run the tactical math a hundred different ways in the years since, and the math always came out the same — the decision had been sound, the alternative would likely have cost more lives — and none of that had ever once made it easier to sleep.

He worked with his hands now. Not because he had to — his disability rating and a small consulting contract with a security firm in Columbus kept him solvent — but because the physical, repetitive labor of fixing what was broken on sixty acres of Ohio farmland was the closest thing Jack had found to

peace. He drove fence posts. He rebuilt the old tractor. He ran three miles every morning before the sun was fully up, not for fitness, though it kept him lean and hard as a fence rail at forty-two, but because motion quieted the part of his brain that otherwise wanted to relitigate that night in the village.

He was not, by his own accounting, a religious man, though he was not the aggressive skeptic that Ethan Walker was either. Jack had seen enough — in combat, in the strange silent moments after violence when men prayed without embarrassment, in things he'd witnessed overseas he couldn't fully explain — that he considered atheism a kind of arrogance he didn't personally have the nerve for. He simply hadn't decided. God, if He existed, had some accounting to do with Jack Reynolds about that night in the village, and Jack figured he'd take that meeting seriously if it ever came. In the meantime, he kept his own counsel, nodded politely when Pastor Whitfield greeted him outside the hardware store, and privately thought that most of the men in Ashwood who called themselves protectors of anything had never actually had to protect anyone from anything that mattered.

He was wrong about that, though he didn't know it yet. He would be tested on that exact question before the sun set on this Tuesday, and every day after it for the rest of his life.

At around one o'clock, Jack drove into town for supplies — fencing wire, a part for the tractor, a sandwich from the diner because he was out of bread at the house — and as he walked in past the Gazette office, he nearly collided with a man he'd never seen before in Ashwood: tall, unhurried, dressed plainly, carrying nothing but a worn leather satchel, standing at the corner of Main and Church as though he were waiting for someone, or for something.

"Afternoon," the stranger said, in a voice that struck Jack as oddly calm for a man standing alone on a street corner in ninety-degree heat.

"Afternoon," Jack said, and kept walking, the way you do with strangers in a small town — a nod, nothing more. It was only half a block later that he realized the man's eyes had tracked him the entire way past, not with suspicion, but with something closer to sorrow, as if he already knew something about Jack Reynolds that Jack himself had not yet learned.

Jack thought about it for exactly as long as it took him to reach the hardware store, and then he forgot about it entirely, the way you forget most strangers in most towns on most ordinary days.

V. The Daughter

Rebecca Whitfield stood at the front of her sixth-period classroom at Ashwood High School, trying, without much success, to get seventeen bored juniors interested in the symbolism of Hester Prynne's scarlet letter on the second-to-last day before summer break's grading window closed.

She was twenty-seven years old, in her fourth year of teaching English, and she was — by the estimation of most people in Ashwood, including her own father, though he would never say it aloud in those exact words — one of the more visibly complicated people in a town that generally didn't run to complications. Everyone knew whose daughter she was. Everyone in the pews on Sunday morning had, at one point or another, asked Caleb Whitfield gently how Rebecca was doing, meaning: *is she still not*

coming to church, and Caleb had, for years now, given some version of the same tired, hopeful, heartbroken answer: *she's finding her own way. Keep praying for her.*

Rebecca did not think of herself as lost. She thought of herself as honest — more honest, in fact, than most of the people in her father's congregation, who she believed recited creeds on Sunday and lived exactly like everyone else the other six days of the week. She had grown up in that church, had been baptized in the creek at age eleven under her father's own hands, had believed, or at least performed belief, with total sincerity as a child. And then she had grown up, watched a beloved grandmother die slow and in pain despite a church full of people praying fervently for a miracle that never came, watched her father bury her mother while still, somehow, standing up in front of people the following Sunday and preaching about a God who was supposedly good, and something in Rebecca had simply — closed. Not violently. Not with drama. Just a door, quietly shutting, and staying shut.

She loved her father. That was the part outsiders never quite understood about her, the part that made her situation genuinely painful rather than simply defiant — she loved Caleb Whitfield more than almost anyone on earth, thought him the kindest, most decent man she knew, and she simply, entirely, did not believe a word of what he'd spent his life preaching. She had told him so, once, three years ago, sitting across from him at his kitchen table, and she had watched something in his face crack open in a way she still thought about more often than she wanted to admit. He had not argued with her. He had not quoted a single verse at her. He had only said, quietly, *I'll never stop loving you, and I'll never stop praying for you, and those two things are the same thing, Rebecca. That's all faith ever really was for me.* She had gone home and cried for an hour and had not been able to fully explain to herself why.

Today, one of her students — Noah Simmons, seventeen, sharp and sullen in the back row, a boy she liked more than she let on because he asked the kind of questions that made the other students groan — raised his hand during the Hawthorne discussion.

"Miss Whitfield, isn't your dad a pastor?"

"He is."

"Do you believe all that stuff? Like — Heaven, the Rapture, all of it?"

The classroom went quiet in the particular way classrooms go quiet when a personal question lands where students don't expect one to land. Rebecca considered her answer the way she considered most things — carefully, honestly, without performance.

"I think my dad believes it with his whole heart," she said. "I think he's one of the best people I know. And no, Noah — I don't believe it. I think when this life is over, it's over. I think we make the most of what we've got while we've got it." She looked around the room, at seventeen faces watching her with the particular hunger teenagers have for adults who will actually answer a real question. "But that's a personal opinion, not an English lesson. Back to Hester."

Noah didn't answer, just nodded slowly and looked back down at his book, and Rebecca had no idea that her casual, honest answer — *when this life is over, it's over* — was about to be tested against reality in the most violent, undeniable way imaginable, in roughly four hours, and that Noah Simmons

himself, the boy whose own parents prayed for him every night at a dinner table three miles from the school, would spend the rest of his life remembering this exact conversation.

She dismissed class at 2:47 p.m., utterly unaware that she had less than half an hour left in the world as she currently understood it.

VI. The Mayor and the Journalist

In the small brick town hall on the square, Mayor Daniel Brooks was doing what mayors of eighteen-thousand-person towns mostly do, which was signing budget line items and fielding a phone call from a county commissioner about resurfacing two miles of Township Road 14.

Brooks was sixty-one, had run the town's only hardware store for thirty years before he'd been talked into running for mayor eight years back, largely because nobody else wanted the job and he was, by unanimous local reputation, the most honest man in Ashwood. He kept a small television in the corner of his office, more out of habit than attention, tuned low to a cable news channel; he glanced at it occasionally between phone calls, the way people glance at weather reports, mildly aware that the world beyond Richland County had been unusually tense in recent weeks — something about troop movements reported near two different borders overseas, something about a joint statement from a coalition of nations Brooks couldn't have named individually if you'd asked him, something about an emergency session at the UN that the anchors discussed with more gravity than Brooks had seen in a long time. It registered the way distant thunder registers on a clear afternoon — noted, filed away, not acted upon, because what, after all, could the mayor of Ashwood, Ohio possibly do about any of it?

"Probably nothing," he told his assistant, Carol, when she asked if he'd seen the news. "It's always something over there. World keeps turning."

Two doors down, in the cramped office of the Ashwood Gazette, Lydia Hayes was doing what she always did, which was noticing things other people didn't bother to notice. She was thirty-six, had worked at three larger papers before two rounds of layoffs sent her home to the town she grew up in, and she had never entirely lost the instinct that had made her a decent reporter in the first place — the sense that the story worth telling was rarely the one everybody was already looking at.

She'd been keeping a private notebook for months now, separate from her actual assignments, jotting down small odd details that struck her as somehow connected, though she couldn't yet have said how: a noticeable uptick in attendance at all four of Ashwood's churches over the past year, well beyond what any single pastor's efforts could explain. A retired missionary couple, the Garrisons, who'd stopped her on the street last month and told her, with an intensity that unsettled her, that the world was "closer to the end than anybody in this town understands." The strange, watchful traveling preacher a few people had mentioned seeing around the county in recent weeks — a man nobody could quite describe consistently, who seemed to appear at diners and gas stations and church parking lots, saying a few quiet words to strangers before moving on. Lydia didn't believe in omens. She believed in patterns, and something about the pattern of the last year had been nagging at the back of her mind in a way she couldn't yet justify in print.

She had no idea, as she filed her Thursday edition proofs a few minutes after two o'clock, that she was about to become, whether she wanted the job or not, the person who would spend the rest of her life writing it all down — not for a byline, not for a paper that would exist much longer, but because someone, someday, would need to know what had actually happened, in order, from someone who had been there and seen it clearly.

VII. The Boy

Noah Simmons walked home from Ashwood High School the long way, the way he always did when he wanted to put off getting home for another twenty minutes — down Elm, past the ballfield, cutting through the church parking lot behind Ashwood Community Baptist because it shaved distance off the walk and because, if he was honest, he liked the quiet of it.

His parents, Dale and Karen Simmons, were the kind of believers who made Noah's teenage rebellion feel, to him, almost like a betrayal every single day — not because they pushed him, exactly, but because they were so relentlessly, unshakably *good* about it. Grace before every meal. His dad up at five most mornings reading his Bible at the kitchen table before work, the same way Noah imagined some kids' fathers got up to jog. His mother's prayer journal, which Noah had glimpsed once by accident, half its entries some version of *Lord, draw Noah to Yourself; break through whatever wall he's built.* He loved them. He resented them, a little, for loving a God he couldn't make himself believe in, and he resented himself more for how much their quiet disappointment weighed on him even though he told everyone, including himself, that he didn't care.

He'd told Rebecca Whitfield the truth in class today, or close enough to it. He didn't think there was a Heaven waiting on the other side of things. He thought his parents were good people who'd built their whole lives around a story, and he loved them too much to tell them exactly how empty he thought the story was, so he mostly just stayed quiet at dinner and let his silence do the talking.

Passing behind the church, he saw the same tall stranger Jack Reynolds had passed downtown an hour earlier, sitting alone now on the low stone wall at the edge of the church lot, a satchel at his feet, looking not at his phone, not at anything really, just out toward the fields beyond the parking lot with an expression Noah could only describe, later, as *waiting.*

"You lost, mister?" Noah asked, because it seemed like the kind of thing you asked a stranger sitting alone behind a church on a Tuesday afternoon.

The man turned and looked at him — really looked, the way almost no adult looked at Noah anymore, like he was seeing something worth seeing — and said, "No, son. I don't believe I am. Are you?"

Noah didn't have an answer for that. The man didn't seem to expect one. He simply nodded once, as though something had been confirmed rather than asked, and said, "It's a good thing you told your teacher the truth today. Keep telling the truth. It's about to matter more than you know." Then he picked up his satchel, stood, and walked off toward Miller Road, unhurried, and by the time Noah thought to ask how the man could possibly know anything about his English class, he was already too far away to call after.

Noah told himself, walking the rest of the way home, that it was a strange coincidence and nothing more — that word must have simply spread around town the way it always did — though some quiet, unexamined part of him understood, even then, that there was no way for that to be true.

He reached his front porch at 3:09 p.m., eight minutes before the world he had always known came to an end, and he had no way of knowing that the last completely ordinary conversation of his life had just been about to happen — at his own kitchen table, with his mother, over the glass of iced tea she was pouring for him at that exact moment as he opened the door.

VIII. 3:17

Across Ashwood, in those last minutes, life went on exactly as life had gone on every Tuesday afternoon for as long as anyone could remember.

Ethan Walker sat in the front seat of his cruiser outside the community pool, ten minutes early for a four o'clock swim lesson that hadn't started yet, drumming his fingers on the wheel to a song on the radio, thinking about nothing more urgent than whether Grace would finally get the hang of her flutter kick today.

Sarah Collins stood at the observation window outside OR 2, having decided at the last minute to watch Marcus Chen's gallbladder case after all, arms crossed, half her attention on the procedure and half on the stack of ER charts still waiting for her downstairs.

Jack Reynolds sat in his truck outside the hardware store, sandwich half-eaten in his lap, radio tuned to a Cincinnati station, thinking, against his better judgment, about a stranger's sorrowful eyes on a street corner.

Rebecca Whitfield graded essays at her classroom desk with the door propped open, the school emptying out around her in the particular golden hush of a summer afternoon.

Caleb Whitfield sat in a vinyl chair in a hospital room at Ashwood Regional, holding Alma Ferris's frail hand, praying quietly with her about her hip, about her grandchildren, about her fear of growing old alone, entirely unaware that in the next room over, a man named Harold Pruitt — Dana's own uncle, as it happened, though neither of them yet knew how that fact would matter — lay reading a worn Gideon Bible a hospice volunteer had left him weeks before, having quietly, privately, and for the very first time in seventy-nine years, asked Jesus Christ to save him three days prior, alone in his bed at two in the morning, telling no one.

Noah Simmons sat down at his kitchen table across from his mother, who set his iced tea in front of him and asked, the way she always did, how his day had been.

Mayor Daniel Brooks signed the last budget line item on his desk and glanced up at the muted television in the corner of his office, where a banner across the bottom of the screen read something about an emergency briefing scheduled at the Pentagon, and thought, distantly, that he really ought to turn the volume up sometime and pay closer attention.

Lydia Hayes closed her notebook — the private one, the strange one, full of things that didn't quite add up yet — and told herself she was imagining patterns that weren't really there.

And somewhere on Miller Road, walking unhurried toward the tree line at the edge of town with a satchel over his shoulder, a stranger no one in Ashwood could later fully describe or account for simply stopped walking, turned his face toward the sky as though listening for something only he could hear, and waited.

The clock in the Ashwood town square, wound faithfully every week for eighty years by a retired postal worker named Chester Gaines, read 3:16.

Then it read 3:17.

And in that single, unannounced, unpreventable instant — with no siren, no warning, no thunder in the sky — the world Ashwood, Ohio had always known simply ceased to exist.

Alma Ferris's hand, still folded between Pastor Caleb Whitfield's two hands in a hospital room at Ashwood Regional Medical Center, was suddenly, impossibly, empty.

Caleb Whitfield was gone.

ASHES OF AMERICA — BOOK ONE AFTER THE VANISHING by Dr. Paul Crawford

CHAPTER TWO

The Vanishing

"For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord." — 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17 (KJV)

I. Between One Breath and the Next

It happened everywhere, all at once, in less time than it takes to blink.

Over the Atlantic, a British Airways captain three hours into a flight from London to Chicago turned to say something to his first officer and found the co-pilot's seat empty except for a uniform jacket, a headset, and a wedding ring rolling in a slow circle on the console. The captain would spend the next four minutes trying to raise anyone on the radio before he understood there was no one qualified left on board to help him land the aircraft, and the passengers behind him — those still there to scream — would not know for another ninety seconds that thirty-one of their fellow travelers, adults and no fewer than six children, had ceased to occupy their seats.

Over Nebraska, a crop duster pilot vanished mid-turn, and his plane corkscrewed into an empty field, the only mercy of the entire catastrophe being that no one was standing beneath it.

In a maternity ward in Nashville, a nurse who had prayed over every baby she'd ever delivered disappeared between one contraction and the next, her hand still raised toward a mother mid-push; in Denver, a Sunday-school teacher substituting for a Tuesday afternoon vacation Bible school program vanished from the front of a room of eleven children, six of whom vanished with her in the same instant, leaving five bewildered classmates alone in a room full of empty folding chairs and a half-finished craft project involving pipe cleaners and glue.

On highways in every time zone on earth, drivers disappeared from behind the wheel of moving vehicles — semis, sedans, school buses, motorcycles — and the vehicles they left behind did not know how to stop themselves. In Atlanta, seven cars piled into each other in the space of four seconds on I-285. In a farm town in Kansas not so different from Ashwood, a grain truck drifted across the centerline and took a young family's minivan head-on, though in that particular case, mercifully and unbeknownst to anyone who would later investigate it, the minivan's driver, a hospice chaplain's wife, had vanished a half-second before impact, and the truck driver had vanished a half-second after, so that the only soul actually lost in that crash was a stray dog that had wandered into the road.

It did not discriminate by age, wealth, nationality, or denomination. It took a five-year-old in Manila and a ninety-one-year-old great-grandmother in rural Alabama. It took missionaries in the deep interior of countries hostile to their message and it took quiet, unremarkable believers who had never once spoken publicly about their faith, whose neighbors would spend the following weeks saying, bewildered, *I didn't even know she went to church.* It took Christian pilots out of cockpits and Christian surgeons out from over open incisions and Christian mothers out from behind steering wheels with their unbelieving children still strapped in car seats behind them, children who would grow up — those who survived what followed — with a memory seared into them of a mother's hands simply not being on the wheel anymore.

It did not take everyone who called themselves Christian. In pulpits across America, at that very hour, a startling number of pastors — men who had preached comfortable sermons about self-improvement and social justice and had not preached the cross in years, men who had never truly surrendered anything to the God they claimed to represent — remained standing exactly where they had been standing, blinking out over sanctuaries gone half-empty in an instant, understanding with a speed that would break some of them entirely that they had spent their careers pointing toward a door they themselves had never walked through.

The event lasted, by every clock that later attempted to measure it, no more than three or four seconds worldwide. It would take the rest of human history to fully measure its cost.

In Ashwood, Ohio, in a hospital room with pale green walls and a window looking out over the employee parking lot, an eighty-four-year-old widow named Alma Ferris felt the two warm, weathered hands that had been folded around her own for the better part of twenty minutes simply cease to be there.

She opened her eyes. Pastor Whitfield's vinyl chair sat empty, angled exactly as he'd left it. His Bible — the same worn black leather Bible he had carried into that room, into every room he had ever prayed in for thirty-one years — lay open on the seat cushion where it had slid from his lap. On the floor beside the chair sat his glasses, folded neatly as if someone had set them down on purpose, though no one had.

Alma Ferris did not scream. She was eighty-four years old and had buried a husband and a son and had, by her own private accounting, already seen most of what this world had to show her. She simply looked at the empty chair for a long moment, and then she began, very quietly, to cry — not from fear, but because some deep, settled part of her, a part that had sat under Caleb Whitfield's preaching every single Sunday for eleven years, understood immediately and completely what had happened, even before the rest of the hospital began to understand it too.

"Oh," she said softly, to no one, to everyone, to God. "Oh, he was right. He was right all along."

II. Code Silver

Three floors up, in Operating Room 2, Sarah Collins was standing at the observation window with her arms crossed, watching Dr. Marcus Chen make a small, practiced incision below his patient's ribs, when the man simply was not there anymore.

It happened with no sound at all. One instant Marcus Chen stood over the draped body of Harold Pruitt — Dana's uncle, seventy-nine years old, admitted two days earlier for the gallbladder that had been giving him trouble for months, and who had, in the private hours of three nights ago, alone in his hospital bed with a hospice volunteer's Gideon Bible open on his tray table, quietly asked a God he'd ignored his entire life to forgive him and save him, and had meant it with everything he had left — and the next instant Marcus Chen's scrubs, mask, gloves, and cap collapsed straight down onto the operating room floor in a loose, empty heap, the scalpel he'd been holding clattering onto sterile drapes with a small, obscene sound that seemed far too ordinary for what had just happened.

For one full second, nobody moved. The anesthesiologist looked up from his monitors, uncomprehending. The scrub nurse looked at the pile of green fabric on the floor as though her brain refused to process what her eyes were reporting. And then, from the same operating table, a second, smaller collapse of fabric and drapes settled onto the mattress where Harold Pruitt's body had been a moment before — his hospital gown, his ID bracelet, the surgical drape that had covered him, all of it deflating gently onto an operating table that was, Sarah realized with a lurch of vertigo so total it nearly buckled her knees, now completely empty.

Both of them. The surgeon and the patient. Gone, in the same half-second, mid-operation, leaving behind nothing but clothing and instruments and an incision with no one left to close it, because there was no longer a body there to close.

"Dr. Collins—" Dana Pruitt's voice came through the intercom from the nurses' station, thin and strange, and Sarah understood in that instant, with the particular cold clarity that crisis had always brought her, that Dana had somehow already known, before anyone told her, exactly whose disappearance this was.

Sarah did not have time to process it. She was already moving — through the scrub room, gloving up on instinct alone, years of training taking over where reason had nothing left to offer her — because whatever had just happened to Marcus Chen and Harold Pruitt, the rest of the hospital had not stopped needing a doctor, and in the next ninety seconds, every single overhead speaker in Ashwood Regional Medical Center erupted at once with overlapping Code Blue announcements, a Code Silver for what the front desk mistakenly first reported as an active assailant before someone corrected it to *unknown emergency, all available staff to the ER,* and, underneath all of it, a rising, terrible chorus of human voices — patients calling for nurses who were no longer in the room, family members screaming in hallways, a delivery nurse three floors down shrieking that the newborn she'd been holding not thirty seconds earlier had simply vanished out of her arms.

Sarah Collins, twenty-nine years old, a woman who had built her entire adult life on the conviction that the universe answered to chemistry and probability and nothing else, stepped into an operating room with an empty table, an empty set of scrubs on the floor, and a scalpel lying where a man's hand had been holding it one half-second before, and felt, for the first time since she was a child, the specific, vertiginous terror of not knowing a single thing about how the world actually worked.

She would not have language for what she was feeling for hours yet. But some small, stunned part of her mind — the same part that had dismissed her mother's faith for a decade as wishful thinking — was already, quietly, beginning to wonder if wishful thinking was capable of doing *this.*

III. The Empty Pool

Ethan Walker was sitting in his cruiser in the Ashwood Community Pool parking lot, forty minutes early, reading a text from Emily — *Grace wants to know if you're bringing her the blue towel or the shark one, this is apparently a life-or-death question* — when he heard the screaming start.

It came from inside the fenced pool area, sudden and total, a dozen voices at once, the specific pitch of sound that every cop learns to recognize instantly as something other than the ordinary shrieking of children at play. Ethan was out of the cruiser and through the gate in under ten seconds, badge already up, hand already dropping toward the radio on his shoulder, and what he saw when he came through the gate stopped him cold in a way that eleven years on the force never had.

The pool deck was full of towels. Full of flip-flops, sunglasses, a scattering of pool noodles bobbing untended on the water's surface. A lifeguard stood frozen on her elevated chair, whistle still raised halfway to her lips, staring down at the shallow end where, thirty seconds earlier, there had been at least a dozen children in a beginner's swim class.

There were four children in the water now. Four, where Ethan — running the numbers with the same cold precision he'd have used at any crime scene — knew there had been closer to fourteen.

He scanned the pool deck, the shallow end, the deep end, the lounge chairs, and did not find his daughter.

"Grace!" His voice came out of him louder and rawer than he intended, cutting straight through the chaos. Parents were converging on the pool now from the fence line, from the snack bar, screaming names of their own. "*Grace Walker!*"

He found her frog-shaped floatie first, drifting empty in the shallow end, one strap still cinched as if a small body had simply stopped being inside it. Her towel — the shark one, the one Emily had texted him about not four minutes ago — sat folded neatly on a lounge chair exactly where Emily must have set it down before she left, because Emily, Ethan understood with a dawning, floor-dropping horror, had brought Grace to the pool early herself, had probably been standing right here.

He searched the whole facility in ninety frantic seconds — the bathrooms, the office, the parking lot, calling her name until his voice broke on it — and Grace Walker was nowhere, and neither, he realized with a second wave of nausea that nearly put him on his knees, was Emily.

His hands were shaking too badly to properly work his phone. He called her twice. Both times it rang through to voicemail — *hi, you've reached Emily, leave a message* — her ordinary, cheerful voice sounding, in that moment, like something being played back from another lifetime.

He drove home with his lights on and his siren silent, because some part of his training understood, even through the panic, that half the calls coming across his radio right now were some version of the exact same nightmare, and that sirens weren't going to mean anything in a town where everyone, it seemed, had somewhere to be that they could no longer get to.

The house on Sycamore Lane was exactly as he'd left it that morning, except that it wasn't. Emily's car sat in the driveway. The front door was unlocked. Her Bible lay open on the kitchen counter to wherever she'd been reading before they left for the pool, a coffee mug half full and gone cold beside it, her reading glasses folded on top of the open page. Grace's small pink sneakers sat by the door where she always left them, side by side, laces still tied, as though she had simply stepped out of them and walked away barefoot.

There was no note. There was no sign of struggle, no sign of anything except two people who had, between one moment and the next, stopped being present in a house that still held every single thing that had belonged to them.

Ethan Walker stood in his own kitchen, a decorated police lieutenant who had talked calmly to armed men and walked into burning buildings, and found that his legs would no longer hold him up. He sat down hard on the kitchen floor, his back against the cabinets, Emily's open Bible within arm's reach, and for the first time since he was nine years old, standing at his own father's graveside, Ethan Walker put his face in his hands and wept.

You pray for me every day, he had said to her that morning, twelve hours and one whole world ago.

Somebody's got to, she had answered.

He understood now, with a clarity that felt like a knife going in slow, that she had not been joking, that she had known something he had spent his entire life refusing to consider, and that the last words he had said to his wife had been half a joke about waffles, and he would give anything — his badge, his career, every year he had left — for one more chance to say something that actually mattered.

IV. Miller Road

Jack Reynolds felt the world change before he understood what had changed, which was, he would later reflect, the exact sensation he used to get in the field a half-second before an ambush — some animal part of the brain registering danger before the conscious mind could catch up.

He was three miles outside town on Miller Road, sandwich forgotten in his lap, when the pickup truck two hundred yards ahead of him drifted, without braking, across the centerline and into the path of an oncoming grain hauler.

The collision was catastrophic and immediate. Jack was out of his own truck and running before the wreckage had finished settling, adrenaline flooding through him in the same clean, focused wave it always had, eleven years of training taking over where panic would otherwise have been. He reached the pickup first — driver's seat empty, airbag deployed against nothing, the seatbelt still buckled around an empty space where a body should have been — and for one disorienting second his mind simply refused the information his eyes were giving him, the same way it had refused certain things he'd seen overseas until there was time later to process them.

There was no time now either. The grain hauler's driver was slumped against his own wheel, alive but bleeding badly from a gash across his forehead, and Jack had him out of the cab and laid flat on the gravel shoulder inside ninety seconds, applying pressure to the wound with his own shirt, talking to the man in the low, steady voice he'd used a hundred times in far worse places than a county road in Ohio. *Stay with me. Look at me. You're gonna be fine, you hear me. Look at me.*

More vehicles were slowing, stopping, drivers getting out — and Jack saw, in the space of the next few minutes, that the wreck on Miller Road was not an isolated event. A woman ran up from a stalled minivan sobbing that her husband had disappeared from the driver's seat while she was buckling their toddler in the back. An elderly man stood beside his own car in the ditch, staring at his hands as though they belonged to someone else, saying over and over that his wife of fifty-one years had simply not been in the passenger seat anymore, though he had definitely, definitely seen her there thirty seconds before.

Jack Reynolds had led men through some of the worst chaos the modern battlefield had to offer, and he had never in his life seen anything that made as little tactical sense as what he was looking at now. There was no enemy. There was no explosion, no attack, no visible cause at all — just empty vehicles, empty seats, and terrified people standing in the road trying to understand a catastrophe that had left behind absolutely no mechanism anyone could point to.

He did the only thing that made sense to a man built the way Jack Reynolds was built: he took charge. He directed the uninjured to help the injured. He got someone's belt around the grain hauler driver's leg to slow a second bleed. He sent a teenager sprinting back toward town for help since half the cell phones on the road, his own included, seemed to be either dead or unable to get a call through a network that had clearly buckled under the weight of ten thousand simultaneous emergencies.

It was only later, hours later, with the injured stabilized and the road finally reached by two exhausted Ashwood police officers and a volunteer fire crew, that Jack allowed himself to stand still for one full

minute and think, unbidden, of a stranger on a street corner that afternoon, and a pair of sorrowful eyes that had looked at him like they already knew something Jack himself did not.

I don't believe I am, the man had said, when Jack hadn't even asked him if he was lost.

Jack did not have a category in his mind for what had just happened on Miller Road. But some old, unexamined part of him — the part that had never quite managed full atheism, the part that had always suspected the universe owed somebody an explanation — understood, standing on that blood-marked gravel shoulder in the reddening evening light, that the accounting he had always assumed was waiting for him somewhere down the road had just, without warning, arrived.

V. The Empty Desks

Rebecca Whitfield was three essays into a stack of forty when Mr. Halloran, the school's ancient, unhurried custodian, began screaming somewhere down the hallway — a sound so entirely foreign to the man's usual placid demeanor that Rebecca was on her feet and moving before she'd consciously decided to move.

The hallway outside her classroom was chaos. A trophy case had shattered — no one seemed to know how — and Mr. Halloran stood over his own mop bucket, staring at a set of coveralls crumpled on the floor exactly where a teacher's aide named Diane Coyle had been standing not ninety seconds earlier, helping him move a supply cart.

"She was right here," Halloran kept saying, an old man's voice gone high and thin with shock. "She was right here, Rebecca, I was talking to her, she was right *here*—"

Rebecca did not, in that first minute, connect what she was looking at to anything supernatural; her mind, trained by four years of teaching teenagers and a lifetime of practical skepticism, reached first for the ordinary explanations — a medical event, a prank, some kind of gas leak causing hallucinations — and discarded each one within seconds as more screaming rose from other parts of the building. She ran the length of the main hallway and found three more sets of clothing on the floor of the front office, including, with a jolt that stopped her cold, the cardigan and reading glasses of Principal Denise Okafor, still sitting in the exact shape of the woman's shoulders as though she had simply stepped out of them from the inside.

Back in her own classroom, of the eleven students who'd stayed after the bell to finish work, two desks now sat empty — Kayla Pruitt, whose grandfather Harold was at that exact moment lying vanished on an operating table across town, and a quiet sophomore named Micah Voss whom Rebecca remembered, with a strange lurch, always bowing his head for a private moment before eating his lunch in the cafeteria.

She tried her father's cell phone. It rang four times and went to voicemail, his familiar recorded voice — *you've reached Pastor Caleb Whitfield, leave a message and I'll return your call as soon as the Lord allows* — and something in the words *as soon as the Lord allows* landed on her now with a weight she could not yet name.

She left the school in the growing chaos, weaving her car through streets already clotting with abandoned vehicles and confused, wandering people, and drove straight to Ashwood Regional, some instinct pulling her there before she could have explained why. She found her father's Buick still parked in the visitors' lot, exactly where he'd left it that morning.

A nurse she recognized from her father's congregation — a soft, kind-faced woman named Patty Owusu, her eyes red and swollen — met her in the hallway outside room 214 before Rebecca had even reached the door, and took both of Rebecca's hands in hers.

"Rebecca, honey," Patty said, and Rebecca understood, from the particular gentleness of the woman's voice, exactly what she was about to hear before a single further word was spoken. "Your daddy was in with Alma Ferris. He was holding her hand, praying with her, same as he does most days." Patty's own eyes filled again. "Sweetheart, he's not here anymore. Nobody can find him anywhere in this whole hospital. His glasses were on the floor. His Bible was open on the chair."

Rebecca stood very still in the hallway of Ashwood Regional Medical Center, twenty-seven years old, and felt something break open inside her chest that had been sealed shut for three years — not disbelief, not yet, not in that first raw minute, but something far more frightening: the first cold breath of the possibility that everything she had told a room full of teenagers that very afternoon, everything she had said with such calm, certain finality — *when this life is over, it's over* — might have been exactly, catastrophically wrong.

She did not cry yet. She would, later, more than she had ever cried in her life. In that first moment, she only stood in the hallway with Patty Owusu's hands still wrapped around her own, staring at the closed door of room 214, and thought of her father's voice from three years ago, sitting across from her at his kitchen table, unshaken, unoffended, entirely gentle: *I'll never stop loving you, and I'll never stop praying for you.*

He had kept that promise. She understood that now in a way she had not let herself understand it before. He had prayed for her every single day of his life, right up until the last one.

VI. Spilled Tea

Noah Simmons was midway through describing his day to his mother — the essay he'd have to finish, the odd stranger behind the church, the question he'd asked Miss Whitfield about the Rapture that had gotten oddly quiet reactions from half the class — when Karen Simmons, in the act of setting a second glass of tea down for herself across the table, simply was not there to finish setting it down.

The glass hit the table and shattered. Tea spread across the wood in a slow, spreading sheet, running off the edge and onto the floor in a steady patter that seemed, in the sudden ringing silence of the kitchen, unbearably loud.

Noah sat frozen, staring at the chair where his mother had been sitting one half-second before, at her apron crumpled on the seat cushion, her wedding ring resting on top of it exactly where her hand would have been.

"Mom?"

No answer. Of course no answer. He said it three more times anyway, his voice climbing, cracking, because some part of him refused to accept what the rest of him had already understood.

He found his father in the garage a minute later — or rather, he found his father's work boots, still upright, still laced, sitting exactly where Dale Simmons had been standing a moment before beside his workbench, a wrench resting on the concrete floor beside them where it had fallen from a hand that was no longer there to hold it.

Noah Simmons stood alone in his garage, seventeen years old, and understood with total, devastating clarity that both of his parents — the father who read his Bible every morning at five a.m. like some men jogged, the mother whose prayer journal he'd glimpsed once by accident, full of pleading for a son who wouldn't listen — were simply gone, vanished out of the middle of an ordinary Tuesday afternoon, and that he was, for the first time in his entire life, completely alone in a house that had never once, not for a single day, been anything but full of them.

He thought, with a violence of feeling that nearly doubled him over, of the words he had said to Rebecca Whitfield's class not three hours earlier. *I don't believe there's a Heaven waiting on the other side of things. When this life is over, it's over.*

He thought of the stranger behind the church. *It's a good thing you told your teacher the truth today. Keep telling the truth. It's about to matter more than you know.*

He sank down onto the garage floor beside his father's empty boots, pulled his knees up to his chest the way he hadn't done since he was small, and for the first time in longer than he could remember, Noah Simmons found himself doing something he had never once believed would do him any good at all.

He began, haltingly, awkwardly, not knowing if anyone was even there to hear it, to pray.

VII. The Square

By five o'clock, the Ashwood town square looked like the staging ground for a disaster no one had yet found a name for.

Mayor Daniel Brooks stood on the steps of the town hall in his shirtsleeves, tie long since discarded, trying to make himself heard over a crowd that had gathered without any organizing, the way crowds do in small towns when something has gone wrong and there is no one else obviously in charge. His assistant Carol was among the missing — he'd found her cardigan draped over her office chair an hour ago, her coffee still steaming beside it, and had not yet let himself think too hard about what that meant. The county sheriff's dispatch, when he'd finally gotten a call through on the landline, had described a scene of total chaos across Richland County: crashes on every major road, hospitals overwhelmed, at least forty people reported missing from the county fairgrounds alone, where a 4-H event had been in full swing.

The muted television in his office, the one he'd told Carol that morning probably wasn't worth turning up, was no longer muted. It hadn't been for the last ninety minutes. Every channel Brooks could find carried some version of the same impossible footage — a national news anchor who had, on live television, simply stopped being behind her desk mid-sentence, her co-anchor staring in open horror at

her empty chair before the network cut, badly, to an emergency slate; amateur cell phone footage of a packed church service where, according to the shaking, sobbing person holding the camera, "half of us just disappeared, I swear to you, I watched it happen"; aerial shots of pileups on interstates in a dozen major cities; a grim-faced correspondent in Washington reporting, in a voice that would not stay steady, that the Vice President could not be located, that several members of Congress could not be located, that no one currently had any idea who, precisely, was in charge of anything.

Brooks had spent thirty years running a hardware store and eight years running a town of eighteen thousand people, and nothing in either job had prepared him for a single word to say to the two hundred frightened residents now gathered in front of the steps he was standing on. He said the only true thing he had.

"I don't know what happened," he told them, his voice carrying with effort across the square. "I don't know why, and I don't know how, and anybody standing up here telling you they've got it figured out inside of two hours is lying to you. What I do know is this: we are still a town. We are still neighbors. And whatever's happened out there tonight, we are going to get through it the same way this town has gotten through everything else in its whole history — together, and by looking after each other."

It was not a great speech. Daniel Brooks would be the first to say so, later, in the calmer moments the coming weeks would occasionally allow him. But it held the crowd together for one more hour, which, on the worst evening Ashwood, Ohio had ever endured, turned out to be worth more than eloquence.

Lydia Hayes stood near the back of the crowd with her notebook already half full, her recorder running, moving through the square collecting names, faces, fragments of testimony with the same instinct that had made her a reporter worth being in the first place — except that tonight, for the first time in her career, she found her hands shaking too badly to write legibly, and had to stop twice to simply stand still and breathe.

She had lost no one. That fact alone set her apart from perhaps half the people around her, and she did not yet understand why, though a private, uneasy thought was beginning to take root in the back of her mind, the same thought that had been nagging at her for months in a notebook she'd never shown anyone — a thought about churches filling up, about strange travelers passing through, about missionaries who'd told her the world was closer to the end than anyone understood. She looked around the square at the wreckage of an ordinary Tuesday — abandoned strollers, empty clothing here and there where it had fallen and no one had yet had the heart to move it, a crowd of stunned faces lit orange by the low evening sun — and she understood, with the particular cold clarity of a journalist recognizing the biggest story of her life arriving at the worst possible cost, that whatever she wrote down tonight would matter more than anything she had ever written before, and that she had better start getting it right.

VIII. Nightfall

Ashwood Regional Medical Center ran on backup generators past sunset, its hallways full of the injured, the terrified, and the lost, Sarah Collins moving between beds on legs that had long since stopped feeling like her own, closing wounds and setting bones and, more than once, simply holding

the hand of someone who had lost a spouse or a child and had nowhere else in that moment to put their grief.

She had not cried yet either. She suspected, distantly, that she would, eventually, once there was time — and time, on this particular night, was the one thing Ashwood Regional had run entirely out of.

Ethan Walker sat alone in his cruiser outside the police station near ten o'clock, having spent the last five hours doing the only thing he knew how to do with grief this large — working, responding, driving from scene to scene until the badge on his chest felt like the only solid thing left in the world — and found himself, in a rare still moment, staring at Emily's open Bible on the passenger seat beside him, which he had, without quite deciding to, picked up off the kitchen counter and brought with him.

Rebecca Whitfield sat in her father's empty study at the parsonage past midnight, his percolator cold on the counter, the little camcorder still sitting on its tripod in the corner exactly as he'd left it that morning. She did not yet know what was recorded on it. She would find out in three days, and it would change the entire remaining course of her life.

Noah Simmons slept, finally, from sheer exhaustion, on the floor of his garage beside his father's empty boots, having prayed the only prayer he knew how to pray — *God, if You're real, if any of what they believed was true, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Please don't leave me here alone* — a prayer he did not yet know how to finish, and would not fully understand the answer to for weeks yet.

Jack Reynolds drove the county roads until nearly two in the morning, helping where he could, unable to make himself go home to a quiet farmhouse that had never once, in four years, felt as uncertain as it felt tonight.

And in a modest brick building on the town square, the Ashwood Gazette's ancient printing press, run that night by Lydia Hayes alone because there was no one left to help her and because she could not make herself simply go to bed, ground out a single-sheet emergency edition to be handed out at dawn — no advertisements, no comics, no weather box in the corner. Just one headline, set in the largest type the old machine could produce, above a blank column where a fuller story would have to wait for a morning that, none of them yet understood, was going to bring news infinitely worse than the one they had already survived.

MILLIONS VANISH WITHOUT EXPLANATION Ashwood Among Communities Affected — Local Losses Include Pastor Caleb Whitfield

Far above Ashwood, past the reach of streetlights and grief, the same stars that had watched over the town every ordinary night of its ordinary history hung in a clear July sky, indifferent and unchanged — though six thousand miles to the east, in the predawn hours of a morning that had not yet reached American shores, men in five different nations were already standing in war rooms studying satellite images of a suddenly leaderless, suddenly reeling superpower, and reaching, in the darkness, for decisions that would ensure this night would not be remembered, for very much longer, as the worst thing that had ever happened to the United States of America.

ASHES OF AMERICA — BOOK ONE AFTER THE VANISHING by Dr. Paul Crawford

CHAPTER THREE

Thirty Minutes to Midnight

"For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape." — 1 Thessalonians 5:3 (KJV)

I. The Decision Already Made

Six thousand miles away, in war rooms that had been preparing for this exact opportunity for longer than most of their own citizens knew, men who had spent a generation waiting for America to show a single moment of true weakness watched satellite feeds of a superpower in convulsion and understood, within the first hour, that the moment had finally come.

It was not a decision born of the vanishing itself, not really. The men gathered around those tables — an alliance quietly built over years between governments that agreed on almost nothing except a shared hatred of the nation whose currency, whose culture, and whose carrier groups had shaped the world for eighty years — had been war-gaming this exact scenario for the better part of a decade: a strike so sudden and so total that the United States would never have the chance to organize a response. What they had never quite been able to plan for was the missing variable that made it possible — the instant, simultaneous removal of a meaningful percentage of the nation's most disciplined, most sacrificial, most steadying citizens, along with the resulting paralysis of a government that could not, in the critical hours that followed, determine who was even legally in command.

They did not know what had caused the disappearances. They did not, in that first night, much care. What mattered to them was arithmetic: a wounded giant, its command structure in chaos, its military bases reporting missing personnel in numbers that bordered on the catastrophic, its president unreachable for reasons no one could yet explain, and a window of opportunity that history might not offer twice.

At 11:42 p.m. Eastern time, less than nine hours after the world changed forever the first time, it changed forever a second time.

What followed took less than thirty minutes from first launch to final detonation, though the men who gave the orders would later say, in the small handful of interviews any of them ever gave on the subject, that it had felt to them like the longest half hour of their lives — the strange, suspended waiting of watching a decision already made travel the last few thousand miles it needed to travel before it could no longer be recalled.

Washington fell first, a blinding white flash over the Potomac that erased, in a single instant, the machinery of a government already reeling and leaderless from the hours before. New York went next, then Los Angeles, then a coordinated series of detonations that walked across the continent from coast to coast almost too quickly for any single human mind to track — Chicago, Dallas, Atlanta, Seattle, Boston, Miami, and city after city after city beyond them, financial centers and military installations and transportation hubs chosen with the cold precision of planners who had studied this nation's vulnerabilities for a generation and had simply been waiting, patiently, for the one morning it would no longer be able to answer them.

Twenty-three cities in all, struck within thirty minutes of one another, in the deep hours of a night when the country's own leadership was still trying to determine who, precisely, remained alive and in what order of succession to take command of a nation that no longer had electricity, communications, or, in any meaningful sense, a functioning capital. High above several of the strikes, additional warheads detonated far above the atmosphere — not to destroy a city, but to end, in a single silent burst of gamma radiation, the electronic nervous system of an entire continent: the power grid, the cellular networks, the internet backbone, the ignition systems of a hundred million vehicles, all of it fried in the space of a heartbeat across a footprint that reached from the Rockies to the Atlantic.

There had been no warning worth the name — a handful of minutes of garbled emergency broadcasts, cut off mid-sentence, reaching only the small fraction of the population still near a working radio or television at that hour. There had been no evacuation, no shelter, no last phone call home for the overwhelming majority of the millions who did not survive what followed. It was, by any accounting history would ever be able to render of it, the deadliest thirty minutes in the story of the United States of America — arriving on the heels of the strangest and most sorrowful afternoon the nation had ever known, as though the two catastrophes had been designed, by some hand far beyond the coalition of men who believed they had planned it all themselves, to fall together.

II. Static

Lydia Hayes was still at her desk in the Gazette office a little after eleven, drinking coffee that had long since gone cold, laying out the emergency edition by hand because the paper's ancient computer system had frozen twice already that night under the strain of a staff too shaken to troubleshoot it properly, when the emergency radio scanner she kept on a shelf above her desk — a relic from her first newspaper job, kept out of habit more than necessity — crackled to life with something that made her set down her pen.

"—repeat, this is not a test. All stations, this is not a test. The Emergency Alert System has issued a national—"

The transmission cut, hissed, came back garbled, cut again. Lydia turned up the volume with hands that had finally stopped shaking sometime around ten o'clock and had now started again.

Across town, in the mayor's office, Daniel Brooks was standing in front of the television with Carol's empty cardigan still draped, untouched, over the back of her chair, when the network feed — already

thin, already patched together from a skeleton crew of visibly terrified anchors working out of a backup studio — froze mid-sentence on a reporter's face and did not come back.

"—confirming reports of multiple detonations along the eastern seaboard, we are being told to evacuate this—"

Then nothing. Not static. Not a test pattern. Simply nothing, the screen going to a flat, dead blue that felt, to Daniel Brooks, more frightening than any image it could have shown him.

He tried the landline. Dead. He tried his cell phone, already down to eleven percent from six hours of use, and found no signal at all, not even the single flickering bar that had gotten him through to the sheriff's office an hour before.

"Lydia," he said into the radio microphone on his desk, the town's old emergency band unit that hadn't been used for anything more serious than a tornado warning in fifteen years, and found, to his profound relief, that at least this — old, simple, low-frequency, needing nothing from satellites or cell towers — still worked. "Lydia, are you getting anything on that scanner?"

"Something's happened," Lydia's voice came back, thin with static but audible. "Daniel, they said multiple detonations. Eastern seaboard. That's all I got before it cut out."

Neither of them said the word out loud yet. Neither of them needed to.

III. The Light on the Horizon

Ethan Walker was driving the county line road just after eleven-thirty, three hours into a shift no one had officially assigned him but that he'd taken anyway because sitting still in an empty house with Emily's open Bible on the passenger seat was a form of torture he could not make himself endure a moment longer, when the northern sky lit up.

It came without sound at first — a silent, enormous bloom of white-orange light rising somewhere far to the northeast, over the curve of the earth, bright enough that for one full second Ethan thought, absurdly, that the sun had somehow risen four hours early. He pulled the cruiser onto the shoulder and got out, staring north, and watched the light climb and spread and finally begin to fade into a dull, sullen red glow low against the clouds, the way a sunset lingers after the sun itself has already gone down.

Cleveland was seventy miles from Ashwood, give or take. Ethan had been there a dozen times in his life — a Browns game with his father when he was nine, a police conference three years ago, a hospital visit to see a cousin recovering from surgery. He stood on the shoulder of County Road 14 with his hand still on the open cruiser door, and understood, with a certainty that arrived in his chest like a physical blow, exactly what he was looking at.

The sound reached him almost two full minutes later — not a bang, not the sharp crack he'd have expected from a lifetime of movies, but a long, rolling, subterranean rumble that seemed to come up through the ground beneath his boots as much as through the air, shaking loose a scatter of gravel from the roadside and rattling the cruiser's windows in their frames.

He was still standing there, one hand braced on the open door, staring north at a horizon gone the color of a dying coal, when every light on his dashboard died at once, the engine coughing, sputtering, and going silent beneath him without so much as a stall — simply off, all at once, as though someone standing beside the truck had reached in and turned an invisible key.

The radio in his hand, still keyed to the department frequency, went dead in the same instant.

Ethan Walker stood alone on a dark county road under a sky gone the wrong color, in a cruiser that would never start again, and understood — slowly, and then all at once, the way understanding arrives on the worst nights of a person's life — that whatever had just happened over the horizon had reached out and touched every circuit in Ashwood at the exact same moment, and that the world he had grown up in, the world of working phones and working cars and working lights, had just ended as completely and as silently as his wife and daughter had ended eight hours before.

IV. Whiteout at Ashwood Regional

Sarah Collins was standing over a patient in the ER — a teenager with a broken arm from one of the day's countless minor accidents, injuries that had once seemed catastrophic and now seemed, by the standards of this particular night, almost restful — when every light in the building died at once, plunging the entire ER into a total, absolute darkness that lasted for one and a half seconds before the backup generators kicked in with a shuddering groan.

The lights that came back on were dimmer, fewer, rationed. And more troublingly, the monitors that came back with them did not all come back correctly. Two of the ER's cardiac monitors flickered, displayed garbage characters across their screens, and died entirely. A ventilator down the hall let out a long, wrong-sounding alarm tone before a nurse's frantic hands switched the patient over to a hand-bagged airway. In the parking lot, security cameras that had been running fine ninety seconds earlier now hung dark on their mounts, and three cars in the lot — modern ones, Sarah would later learn, the kind built around delicate onboard computers — simply would not start, their electronics apparently fried by something no one in the building yet had a name for.

"What was that?" Dana Pruitt asked, appearing at Sarah's elbow, her face gray with an exhaustion that had nothing left in reserve for a second catastrophe on top of the first.

"I don't know," Sarah said, and hated, more than she had hated almost anything in her adult life, how often she had said those exact words in the last nine hours. She had built a career, a whole identity, on always knowing — on trusting that whatever was wrong with a body could be found, named, and fixed if you simply applied enough evidence and enough skill. Tonight had cost her that certainty twice already: once at 3:17 that afternoon, and now again, at nearly midnight, as she stood in a hospital running on failing backup power with no way to call for help from anywhere beyond its own walls.

The hospital's landlines were dead. The cell towers, already overloaded for hours, now appeared to be entirely gone rather than merely busy. The hospital's own maintenance chief, a steady, unflappable man named Roy Castillo who had kept the building's ancient systems running through two decades of budget cuts, came through the ER at a dead run a few minutes later with the particular look of a man who had just understood something enormous.

"Dr. Collins," he said. "The main transformer's fried. Backup generator's holding for now but we've got maybe seventy-two hours of diesel if we're careful, less if the AC units keep drawing the way they are. And it's not just us. I drove two blocks before my truck died on me — I had to walk back. Whole grid's down. I mean whole. Streetlights, everything. It's black as a cave out there."

Sarah looked past him, through the ambulance bay doors, out at a town that had, within the space of a single day, gone from the ordinary electric glow of any small American city at night to a darkness so total and so sudden that it felt, standing there in her blood-spattered scrubs at the end of the worst day of her life, like something out of a different century entirely — or, though she could not have named the feeling that way yet, like judgment.

V. Dead Engines

Jack Reynolds was three miles from his farm, finally heading home after nearly nine straight hours of triage, wreckage, and grief he had no proper category for, when his truck's engine died beneath him without warning, the dashboard going dark, the power steering locking stiff under his hands as he wrestled the dead vehicle onto the shoulder.

He sat for a moment in the sudden, total silence, and then did what eleven years of training had drilled into him past the point of conscious thought: he catalogued. Engine dead — not stalled, dead, the way a device dies when its battery is pulled rather than drained. Dashboard lights gone entirely, no dim flicker, no slow fade. His phone, already useless for hours, now would not even power on. And behind him, up and down the length of Miller Road as far as he could see in the darkness, other cars sat exactly the same way — dead, dark, abandoned at odd angles where their drivers had coasted them to a stop or simply left them where they'd died.

He had read about this once, years ago, in a briefing packet nobody in his unit had taken especially seriously at the time — a classified assessment on the vulnerability of the American power grid and civilian vehicle fleet to a high-altitude electromagnetic pulse. He remembered enough of it now to feel something cold settle into his stomach that had nothing to do with the summer night air.

An EMP meant a nuclear detonation, high above the atmosphere, deliberately positioned to fry electronics across a massive radius rather than to destroy a single target. It meant this was not an isolated tragedy. It meant that whatever light and sound had rolled across the northern horizon an hour ago — and Jack had felt that rumble in his chest same as every other soul in Richland County — was very likely not the only one, and that somewhere above or near American soil tonight, an enemy Jack Reynolds had spent eleven years training to fight in deserts half a world away had instead found a way to bring the fight home.

He walked the last three miles to his farmhouse in the dark, boots crunching on gravel, the sky above him a canopy of stars more numerous and more brilliant than he had ever once seen them over Ohio in his entire life — because for the first time since electricity had come to Richland County the better part of a century ago, there was no light pollution left anywhere between here and the horizon to dim them.

It should have been beautiful. Jack Reynolds, standing in his own driveway a little after one in the morning, looking up at a sky lit only by God's own hand, found that it was one of the most frightening things he had ever seen.

VI. Lantern Light

He did not go inside. Instead, out of an instinct he did not stop to examine, Jack walked the quarter mile down the dark gravel road to the Hendersons' place — Walt and Doris Henderson, both in their seventies, who had farmed the land next to his grandfather's for as long as Jack could remember and who had no business, on a night like this one, being left to figure out an EMP and a dead nation on their own.

He found Walt on the porch in the dark, a battery lantern at his feet, a bolt-action deer rifle laid across his knees out of an old man's plain good sense rather than any particular fear.

"Figured that was you," Walt said, as Jack's shape resolved out of the darkness. "Heard your boots on the gravel from fifty yards. Old ears still work even when nothing else does."

"You two all right?"

"We're old, Jack, not helpless. Doris has got candles going and we've got two hundred pounds of canned goods in the cellar and a well with a hand pump backup, same as my daddy put in during the Cuban Missile business, God rest him, and never once thought he'd need. Question's whether the rest of this county's as ready as we are." Walt studied him a moment in the lantern light. "You got that look on you, son. The one you had after you came back from overseas that first time. What'd you see out there tonight?"

Jack told him — the wreck on Miller Road, the dead engines, the light in the north, the sound that had rolled through the ground like something out of the book of Revelation his own mother used to read to him as a boy, before Jack had decided, sometime in his twenties, that he'd rather trust a rifle than a promise he couldn't verify.

Walt listened without interrupting, the way men of his generation had learned to listen to bad news, and when Jack finished, the old farmer nodded slowly, as if confirming something to himself rather than reacting to something new.

"Then it's started," Walt said quietly. "Whatever it is. And Jack — I mean this with love, because I've known you since you were knee-high to a fence post — this town's going to need men who know how to keep order and keep people fed a lot more than it's going to need men who know how to argue about whether God's real. You've got the first set of skills, whatever you decide about the second. Folks are going to look to somebody, once the shock wears off and the fear sets in proper. Might as well be somebody who won't get drunk on it."

Jack didn't answer right away. He looked back down the dark road toward his own farmhouse, and past it, toward the invisible glow of a town he'd have said, twenty-four hours ago, he mostly kept his distance from out of habit more than dislike.

"I'll walk the road again at first light," he said finally. "Check on the Ashers, the Pattersons, anybody else out this way. See who needs what."

"That's a start," Walt said, and for the first time that terrible night, something in his old, weathered face looked almost like relief. "That's a fine start, son."

VII. The Parsonage

Rebecca Whitfield was sitting in her father's dark study, a single battery-powered lantern from his emergency kit throwing long shadows across the bookshelves, when the last of the town's streetlights outside the window guttered and died along with everything else.

She had not slept. She had spent the hours since Patty Owusu's gentle, devastating words in the hospital hallway simply sitting in her father's chair, surrounded by his things — his sermon notes in their careful, cramped handwriting, his coffee mug still sitting unwashed by the sink, the small camcorder on its tripod in the corner that she had noticed but not yet had the strength to touch. Grief had come for her in waves throughout the evening, each one worse than the last, compounded now by something she recognized, with the clinical honesty she brought to everything, as fear — a fear that had nothing to do with her father's disappearance and everything to do with the sound she had felt roll through the ground beneath the parsonage an hour ago, and the darkness that had swallowed the entire town in its wake.

She had grown up in Ashwood. She knew every streetlight on Main Street by heart, had watched them flicker on every evening of her childhood from this exact window while her father worked late in this exact room. Watching them die now, one by one down the length of the street, felt like watching something ancient and permanent quietly come to an end.

She picked up her phone out of habit, though it had been useless for hours, and found the screen would not even light. She tried her car — dead, same as every other vehicle on the block, according to the shouts and confused voices she'd heard passing on the sidewalk outside for the last twenty minutes.

Alone in her father's study, in the flickering lantern light, Rebecca Whitfield found herself doing something she had not done with any sincerity in over a decade: she picked up her father's Bible from where it had been returned to her, along with his glasses, by a kind hospital chaplain earlier that evening, and she opened it — not to read, not yet, she was not ready for that yet — but simply to hold it, the worn leather warm and familiar under her hands in a way that surprised her, the way an old photograph can suddenly ambush you with feeling you thought you'd long since made peace with.

"I don't know what to believe, Dad," she said aloud, to the empty room, to the empty chair, to whoever might be listening. "But something is very wrong with the whole world tonight. And I think — I think you might have been right about more of it than I ever let myself imagine."

Outside, in the total, unfamiliar darkness of a town with no more electric light left anywhere within it, a dog began to howl, and was joined, a moment later, by another, and then another, until the sound rolled across all of Ashwood like something ancient and instinctive, some ancient animal knowledge that man had lost long ago and machines had never possessed at all — the simple, wordless understanding that something in the created order had gone terribly, fundamentally wrong.

VIII. Sirens Without Warning

Noah Simmons woke on the cold concrete of his garage floor to a flash of light so bright it forced its way through his closed eyelids, followed, an unbearable stretch of seconds later, by a low, rolling boom that rattled the garage door in its frame and set off a chorus of car alarms up and down the street — alarms that died, one after another, within seconds, as though something had reached out and silenced them all at once.

He sat up, heart slamming, disoriented for one merciful half-second before the memory of the day came crashing back over him whole: his mother's apron on the kitchen chair, his father's empty boots beside him on the garage floor, the prayer he had choked out hours before to a God he had spent seventeen years dismissing.

He stumbled to the garage's side door and looked out at a sky gone strange — a dull, reddish smear low on the northern horizon where there should have been nothing but ordinary darkness, and directly overhead, more stars than he had ever seen in his life, cold and brilliant and utterly indifferent to whatever had just happened.

Every house on his street was dark. Not dark like late at night, when people had simply turned their lights off to sleep — dark like abandoned, dark like a street in a photograph of somewhere that had been empty for years. He tried the light switch inside the garage out of pure reflex and nothing happened, not even a flicker, and the small clock radio on his father's workbench, which had been playing quietly when Noah fell asleep, sat silent now, its display blank.

He thought of the stranger behind the church. *It's a good thing you told your teacher the truth today. Keep telling the truth. It's about to matter more than you know.*

He thought of his mother's prayer journal, the pages he'd only glimpsed once, full of pleading for a son who wouldn't listen, and wondered, standing alone in the dark in his socked feet on the cold concrete of an empty garage, seventeen years old and orphaned in the space of a single Tuesday, whether she had somehow known — whether all of them had known, all along, exactly what kind of night this was going to be, and had simply loved him too much to make him believe it before he was ready.

He was ready now. It had taken losing everything to get him there, and some small, honest part of him understood, even in his grief, that this was probably exactly the kind of terrible bargain his mother would have grieved most of all — that it took the very thing she'd prayed against to finally open her son's eyes.

"I'm listening now," Noah said, to the dark, to the stars, to whoever might still be listening back. "I don't understand any of it yet. But I'm listening."

IX. The Blackout

By one o'clock in the morning, Ashwood, Ohio sat in a darkness more complete than any its residents had experienced in their lifetimes — no streetlights, no porch lights, no glow of televisions through

curtained windows, no distant hum of traffic on Route 9. The only illumination anywhere in town came from candles and flashlights and the occasional battery lantern, small constellations of amber light scattered behind windows up and down streets that had, twelve hours earlier, been as unremarkable as any small town in America.

Daniel Brooks and Lydia Hayes met in person at the town hall a little before two, drawn there by the same wordless instinct that pulls people in crisis toward whatever passes, in a small town, for the center of things. They stood together on the dark steps with a single lantern between them, and pieced together, from fragments — Lydia's scanner traffic, a ham radio operator three streets over who'd gotten a garbled transmission through before the airwaves went entirely silent, the testimony of a dozen shaken residents who'd seen their own version of the light on the horizon — a picture that neither of them wanted to believe and that both of them, by two in the morning, no longer had the luxury of doubting.

"Cleveland," Lydia said quietly, reading from the notebook she'd been filling all night by lantern light. "That's the one we saw. But the ham radio operator — before he lost the signal — he said there were others. Chicago. New York. Says somebody screamed something about Dallas before it cut out. He said the word 'nuclear' at least three times, Daniel. I wrote it down because I didn't trust my own ears."

Brooks said nothing for a long moment, looking out at his own dark town, at the cannon in the square silhouetted against a sky gone strange and starlit, at a scattering of candlelit windows that represented, as far as he currently knew, the entire remaining visible evidence of civilization.

"If that's true," he finally said, "then there's no cavalry coming, Lydia. Not from the county. Not from the state. Not from Washington. Whatever's left of this country tonight has bigger fires to put out than one small town in Ohio nobody's ever heard of."

"So what do we do?"

Brooks was quiet again, and when he finally answered, his voice carried a weight Lydia had never heard in it before, not in eight years of covering every council meeting and budget fight and ribbon-cutting of his mayoralty.

"We do what this town has always done," he said. "We look after our own. Starting tomorrow morning, at first light — because there's nothing left to do tonight except wait for a sun we don't even know is going to look the same when it comes up."

It did come up, in the end, gray and strange through a haze that hadn't been in the Ohio sky the evening before, haze that had drifted, invisible and silent, on high winds from the ruin of a city seventy miles to the northeast. It rose over a town that had gone to bed, twenty-four hours earlier, as an ordinary American community with working lights and working phones and working cars and a full church roster and a football stadium being readied for a season nobody yet knew would never be played — and it rose now over a town cut off completely from the nation it had always assumed would be there to catch it if it ever fell.

Ashwood, Ohio was alone. Truly, completely alone, in a way no one gathered in the darkness of that town hall, or huddled in that hospital, or sitting vigil beside an empty chair in a dark parsonage study, had ever once imagined a single day of their lives could actually become.

In the days and weeks that would follow, historians who survived to write anything down at all would struggle over how to properly name what had happened that night — whether it belonged in the same account as the vanishing that preceded it, or whether it deserved to stand alone as its own separate catastrophe, the second half of a single unthinkable day. Lydia Hayes, for her part, never did settle on separating them in her own private record. She would write, in the notebook she kept faithfully for the rest of her life, that the two events had always felt to her like a single blow delivered in two motions — the first removing the light of the world, and the second removing its power — and that anyone who had lived through both, on the same endless Tuesday night, understood in their bones that they were not being asked to survive one disaster, but to somehow survive the end of the only world they had ever known.

The vanishing had taken their loved ones.

The fire in the sky had taken their nation.

What remained — the neighbors, the fields, the fences, the faith some of them were only now, in the wreckage of everything else, beginning to reach for — was about to become the entire world. And in the gray, hazy morning that followed, as the people of Ashwood, Ohio stepped out of darkened houses onto quiet streets littered with the powerless husks of their own cars, none of them yet understood that the greatest test of who they truly were — not who they had been on an ordinary Tuesday, but who they would choose to become now that ordinary was gone forever — was only just beginning.

ASHES OF AMERICA — BOOK ONE AFTER THE VANISHING by Dr. Paul Crawford

CHAPTER FOUR

Ashes on the Horizon

"I beheld the earth, and, lo, it was without form, and void; and the heavens, and they had no light. I beheld the mountains, and, lo, they trembled, and all the hills moved lightly. I beheld, and, lo, there was no man, and all the birds of the heavens were fled... For this shall the earth mourn, and the heavens above be black." — Jeremiah 4:23–25, 28 (KJV)

I. The Color of the Sky

Morning came to Ashwood the way morning comes to a house after a death in the family — the sun rising on schedule, indifferent, as though nothing at all had happened, while everyone beneath it moved through the motions of a day they no longer recognized.

Rebecca Whitfield had not slept. She had watched the window of her father's study go from black to a deep, bruised gray sometime around six, and it was the color of that gray, more than anything else, that finally drove her outside onto the parsonage porch to see it for herself. The sky over Ashwood on an ordinary July morning was the pale, washed blue of Ohio summer, streaked sometimes with high cirrus

if a front was moving through. This sky was different. A thin brown haze hung low along the northern horizon, catching the early light and turning it the sickly orange-yellow of an old photograph left too long in the sun, and threading up through it, faint but unmistakable if you knew to look for it, were long gray smears of smoke — not the ordinary column of a house fire or a brush fire, but something wider, flatter, spread out along the whole curve of the sky the way a stain spreads through cloth.

Cleveland was burning, seventy miles away, and it had been burning all night, and it would go on burning, Rebecca understood with a strange, hollow calm, for longer than any fire she had ever imagined a person could survive standing near.

She was not alone on the porch for long. Up and down the street, doors were opening one by one as neighbors stepped out into a morning that smelled, faintly but unmistakably, of smoke that had traveled a long way to reach them — a smell Rebecca would spend the rest of her life unable to fully separate from the memory of this particular week. Mrs. Alderson from two doors down stood in her bathrobe on her own front step, one hand pressed flat against her chest, simply staring north. A boy Rebecca recognized from her third-period class rode past on a bicycle — one of the only forms of transportation left in Ashwood that still worked, now that every vehicle built after roughly 1985 sat dead in its driveway — pedaling hard toward town, his face white and set, clearly carrying news he was in a hurry to deliver.

Rebecca went back inside only long enough to retrieve her father's Bible, which she had, without entirely deciding to, begun carrying with her the way another person might carry a phone — not reading it yet, not really, but keeping it close, the way you keep close anything that once belonged to someone whose absence still didn't feel real.

II. What the Travelers Brought

By mid-morning, the town square had filled again, though the crowd had a different character than the one that had gathered there the night before. Last night's crowd had been shocked, grieving, looking for answers no one had. This morning's crowd was quieter, grimmer, and it had grown by perhaps two hundred more people, because word had spread — on foot, by bicycle, neighbor to neighbor, the only network still functioning in a county that had lost every other kind — that anyone with real information about the outside world should come to the square, where Mayor Brooks had promised, the night before, to share whatever he learned.

What he had learned, as it turned out, came less from any official source than from the travelers.

They arrived throughout the morning in twos and threes, on foot mostly, a few on bicycles, one elderly couple in a horse-drawn hay wagon that a farmer named Gene Sowerby had apparently improvised sometime in the small hours of the night out of pure stubborn necessity, having realized, correctly, that his two draft horses were about to become more valuable than every truck he owned. They came from Mansfield, from smaller towns along Route 30, from the outskirts of what had been the Cleveland suburbs, walking distances that would have seemed unthinkable to any of them one day earlier, and they brought with them the first real, textured account of what had happened to the rest of the country

— an account far worse, in its cumulative weight, than the scattered fragments Lydia had gathered from her scanner the night before.

A man named Roger Delacroix — mid-fifties, a long-haul trucker who'd been three hours from home when his rig died on I-71 and who had walked the rest of the way, sleeping four hours in a ditch — stood on the town hall steps a little before eleven and told the crowd, in a flat, exhausted voice that had clearly already told this same story a dozen times to a dozen smaller groups along the way, what he had seen and heard.

"Cleveland's gone," he said. "Not damaged. Gone. I could see the glow from forty miles out last night, and this morning, coming this way, you can smell it if the wind's right. There's people walking out of the suburbs by the thousands, and from what I heard on a working CB somebody had rigged up outside Medina — because CBs don't run through the same circuits as your regular radios, something about the frequency, don't ask me the details — Chicago's the same. New York. LA. I heard a fella say Dallas, Atlanta, more besides. Boston. Seattle. Miami. I don't know how many for certain, and I don't know if anybody left alive knows for certain, because there's nobody left in charge to keep count."

A woman in the crowd called out, her voice cracking, "What about Washington? What about the President?"

Delacroix was quiet for a moment. "Word is Washington's gone too," he said finally. "Word is nobody rightly knows who's even supposed to be in charge anymore. Some folks are saying the Vice President's alive somewhere, giving orders from a bunker, but I heard that from three different people in three different places and no two of them agreed on where or who. Far as I can tell, ma'am, there ain't a government right now. There's just — pieces. People trying to hold their own little pieces together, same as you all are trying to do right here."

The crowd absorbed this in a silence that felt, to Lydia Hayes, standing near the front with her notebook and her recorder that no longer had any working batteries left to power it, heavier than any sound could have been. She wrote by hand instead, fast and cramped, trying to capture not just the words but the particular quality of the silence that followed them — the sound, she would later describe it in her own private record, of an entire town understanding, all at once, that the country they had woken up in yesterday morning simply no longer existed in any form they would recognize.

Mayor Brooks stood beside Delacroix on the steps, his face gray with exhaustion and something closer to grief than fear, and when the crowd's questions finally quieted, he spoke the sentence that Lydia would end up using, months later, as the opening line of the first chapter of the history she eventually wrote about that terrible summer.

"Neighbors," he said, "I think we have to accept that no one is coming to save us. Which means we are going to have to save each other."

III. The Run on Higbee's

It began, as these things so often do, with a single moment of panic that spread faster than anyone could have contained it.

Higbee's Grocery had opened its doors that Wednesday morning at its usual hour, seven a.m., because Ron Higbee — sixty-one years old, third generation running the store his grandfather had opened in 1952 — had decided, in the absence of any clearer instructions from anyone, that opening the store and letting people buy what they needed was the most useful thing he personally knew how to do. His cash registers were dead, so he'd set up a card table by the door with a legal pad, writing down what people took and what they owed, on the honest assumption that money would eventually mean something again and people would eventually pay him back.

It worked, more or less, for about ninety minutes.

What broke it was a rumor — no one would ever be entirely sure who started it, though Lydia spent weeks afterward trying to trace it — that the state's emergency food distribution trucks, the ones that supplied Higbee's twice a week from a regional warehouse near Mansfield, were never coming again, and that whatever was on the shelves right now was, in a very real sense, the last food Ashwood was ever going to see delivered from outside its own borders.

It was, as it happened, entirely true. But the manner in which the town learned it was true turned out to matter almost as much as the fact itself.

By nine-thirty, the line outside Higbee's stretched half a block down Main Street, and the tenor of the crowd had shifted from the orderly, grieving patience of the night before into something tighter, more anxious, more inclined to elbow. By ten, people inside the store had stopped waiting their turn at Ron's card table and simply started filling carts as fast as their hands could move, and Ron, standing at the front of his own store watching three decades of careful, honest business collapse into a scrum of shoving neighbors fighting over the last cases of bottled water, found that he did not have it in him to stop them.

Sarah Collins arrived a little after ten-thirty, having finally handed off the ER to the two other physicians on staff for a two-hour break she desperately needed, intending only to buy a few basic supplies for the small apartment she rented three blocks from the hospital. She found the parking lot in chaos — a shouting match already underway between two men over a shopping cart, a woman crying openly by her car because she'd come too late and the shelves, by the time she reached them, were nearly bare — and stood for a moment at the edge of it all with the specific, weary clarity of someone who had spent the previous night pronouncing time of death on patients she couldn't save and had no capacity left in her for one more version of human desperation.

She went in anyway. She needed insulin for a diabetic patient back at the hospital whose home supply had run out, and Higbee's small pharmacy counter, picked clean of nearly everything else, still had three boxes left in the refrigerated case. She was reaching for them when a man she didn't recognize — heavyset, sunburned, clearly a farmer or laborer of some kind, his hands shaking with something that looked less like anger than pure animal fear — grabbed her wrist.

"That's mine," he said. "I saw it first."

"Sir, I'm a physician. I need this for a patient at Ashwood Regional who will die without it."

"Everybody's dying of something today, lady. My kids need to eat. I don't know what this world's gonna look like tomorrow and I'm not walking out of here without something in my hands."

It was not, Sarah understood even in the moment, really about the insulin at all — the man had no obvious use for it, had grabbed it, she realized, simply because it was the last thing left within reach on a shelf that had been full an hour ago, out of a panic that had nothing to do with reason and everything to do with the particular terror of watching the ground disappear beneath your own feet with no way to know how far you might fall. She did not fight him for it. She simply held his eyes, steady, the same voice she used on frightened patients and frightened families.

"I understand you're scared," she said. "I am too. But there's a little girl in a bed at that hospital right now who is going to go into a coma tonight if she doesn't get this. I'm not asking you to save her. I'm asking you to let her mother do it. Please."

Something in the man's face broke, not into calm exactly, but into a kind of exhausted shame that Sarah would see mirrored on a dozen more faces over the following weeks, as ordinary, decent people discovered, for the first time in their lives, exactly how thin the veneer of civilization actually was once the shelves went empty and no one could say for certain when — or whether — they would ever be full again. He let go of her wrist. He walked away without another word, and Sarah stood alone at the ravaged pharmacy counter for a moment with the insulin clutched against her chest, shaking harder than she wanted to admit, understanding with a cold, clinical certainty that this had been the first skirmish of something much larger, and that Ashwood, Ohio had perhaps eighteen hours of civilization left in it if something did not change, and change quickly.

By noon, Higbee's shelves were entirely bare. By one, the store's front windows had been broken by persons unknown, and what little remained in the stockroom in back — a scattering of items too obscure or too unappealing for the initial panic to have claimed, cans of unfashionable vegetables, bags of flour, a case of pickling salt — had vanished as well, carried off by a second, smaller wave of scavengers working through the wreckage of the first.

Ron Higbee sat on the curb outside his family's store a little after two o'clock, his legal pad still in his lap, half-filled with careful handwritten records of purchases no one would ever pay him back for, and wept without shame in front of anyone who cared to see it — not for the money, he would tell Lydia later, when she came to interview him for the record she was keeping, but because he had watched, in the space of six hours, neighbors he had known his entire life turn into people he did not recognize, and he did not know, sitting there on that curb, whether that transformation could ever be undone.

IV. Dead Lines

While the chaos at Higbee's unfolded, Daniel Brooks spent the morning trying, with steadily diminishing hope, to reach anyone beyond Ashwood's borders who might be able to tell him something official.

The town hall's landlines remained dead, as they had since the previous night. Cell service had not returned, and by midday a young man on Brooks's small staff who understood such things better than

the mayor did — a part-time IT contractor named Trevor Ashby who'd been keeping the town's ancient computer systems limping along for years — delivered the verdict Brooks had already half suspected.

"Cell towers run on their own power and backup batteries, sure," Trevor explained, standing in the mayor's office with the particular over-explaining nervousness of a young man trying to sound calm in front of an authority figure while delivering catastrophic news. "But even if the towers themselves survived the pulse — and a lot of them probably didn't, especially anything built in the last fifteen, twenty years with modern electronics in it — the whole system's useless if there's no backbone to route the calls through. No internet. No long-distance switching. It's not that your phone's broken, Mr. Mayor. It's that the entire system your phone talks to doesn't exist anymore. Not here. Maybe not anywhere in about a five, six hundred mile radius, depending how many of those high pulses they set off and where."

"How long before it comes back?"

Trevor was quiet for a moment. "Best case, if the government — whatever's left of it — has the resources and the will to prioritize rebuilding infrastructure out here in rural Ohio ahead of the big cities that got hit direct? Maybe a year. Realistic case?" He shrugged, and the gesture contained more honest despair than any words could have. "I don't know, sir. I really don't."

Brooks absorbed this the way he'd absorbed every piece of bad news over the last eighteen hours — with a slow, deliberate stillness that Carol used to tease him about, back when Carol was still there to tease him about anything, calling it his "hardware store face," the expression he'd perfected over thirty years of telling customers that no, he was sorry, that particular part had been discontinued and there simply wasn't a substitute.

There was one bright spot, and it came, unexpectedly, from an eighty-three-year-old widower named Frank Pelletier, who arrived at the town hall a little after noon pulling a child's Radio Flyer wagon behind him, on top of which sat a large, ancient piece of equipment that looked, to Brooks's untrained eye, like something out of a museum.

"Ham radio," Frank announced, with the particular pride of a man whose lifelong hobby had just become, overnight, one of the most valuable skills in the entire county. "Built most of this rig myself back in '78, and I've kept the tubes and the parts stock up out of pure stubbornness ever since, on account of my late wife always said I was wasting the garage on a hobby nobody'd ever need again. Well." He set the wagon down with evident satisfaction. "Turns out old tube equipment doesn't much care about your fancy modern pulses, Mr. Mayor. Solid-state circuits, sure, they're fried same as everything else. But vacuum tubes are a different animal entirely. This rig'll run just fine off a car battery, and I happen to have three of those charged up in my basement that never got connected to anything the pulse could reach."

By early afternoon, Frank Pelletier's basement had become, by simple necessity, the closest thing Ashwood possessed to a communications hub — a role the old man settled into with the quiet, focused competence of someone who had spent forty years imagining, in a hobbyist's idle way, exactly this kind of emergency, and had never once expected to actually need to be ready for it.

V. Jack's Circuit

Jack Reynolds spent the day the way he had told Walt Henderson he would spend it — walking the roads, checking on neighbors, doing the only kind of useful work he currently knew how to do in a world where his truck sat dead in his own driveway.

He found, over the course of that long, hot Wednesday, a county in wildly uneven states of readiness. Some farms — the older ones, run by families who had never fully abandoned the habits of a harder, more self-sufficient generation — were weathering the crisis with a kind of grim, practiced calm: root cellars stocked, wells with hand-pump backups, livestock that didn't depend on electric fences or automated feeders. Other households, mostly closer to town, mostly younger families who had never known a version of life that didn't run on electricity and delivery trucks and twenty-four-hour grocery stores, were already sliding into a raw, undisguised panic that worried Jack far more than any single tactical problem he could identify.

He found the Ashers, two farms over, with a broken well pump and no working generator, and spent an hour helping the family's teenage sons rig a hand-crank alternative out of parts salvaged from an old bicycle, a piece of engineering that would have struck Jack, on any other day of his life, as a minor curiosity, and that struck him now as one of the more important things he had done in years.

He found the Pattersons in the middle of a shouting match with a neighboring family over a fence line dispute that had, as far as Jack could tell, existed peacefully for a decade and had suddenly, overnight, become a matter of who owned which three rows of unharvested sweet corn — a small, almost absurd argument that nonetheless left Jack with a cold, settled feeling in his gut, because he recognized in it the first faint outline of something he had seen before, in other places, under other kinds of collapse: the speed with which scarcity turned neighbors into rivals, and rivals, eventually, into something worse.

By late afternoon, walking back toward town along Miller Road past the wreckage from the night before — the pickup and the grain hauler, still where they'd crashed, already being quietly stripped of anything useful by passersby who clearly no longer felt the ordinary compunctions about touching a stranger's property — Jack found himself doing the thing his training had always done for him without his conscious permission: running the numbers, assessing the terrain, identifying strengths and vulnerabilities, building, without meaning to, the outline of a plan.

Ashwood had roughly eighteen thousand residents spread across a town and surrounding township with no natural defensive boundary beyond the creek and a scattering of low hills. It had a small, poorly equipped police force, most of whose modern vehicles were now useless. It had farmland enough, in theory, to feed itself through a hard winter if — and it was an enormous if — that farmland could be protected, organized, and its harvest fairly distributed rather than fought over field by field the way the Pattersons and their neighbors were already beginning to fight over three rows of sweet corn.

It had, Jack thought, walking past the stripped wreckage of two vehicles whose owners had vanished from behind their wheels less than twenty-four hours earlier, absolutely nothing standing between the version of itself it had been yesterday and the version of itself it was about to become, except the choices its remaining residents made over the next several days.

He reached the town square a little before six, in time to hear the tail end of a second, smaller gathering Mayor Brooks had called — not the whole town this time, just a working group of people Brooks had begun, out of pure instinct, to identify as capable: Ethan Walker, still in uniform though the badge no longer represented any functioning state authority behind it; Sarah Collins, called away from the hospital for an hour to speak to the state of the town's medical supplies; Roy Castillo from the hospital's maintenance crew; a handful of local farmers; and, standing a little apart from the rest with a notebook in her hand, Lydia Hayes, who had appointed herself, without asking anyone's permission, the meeting's official record-keeper.

Jack stepped into the circle without being invited, and no one questioned it. Something in the way he carried himself — the same quiet, load-bearing steadiness Walt Henderson had recognized on his porch the night before — seemed to answer the question before it could be asked.

VI. The Working Group

"We've got maybe four days of food left in this town, spread across whatever people managed to grab today and whatever they already had in their pantries," Brooks said, standing at the center of the small circle in the fading evening light, his voice hoarse from a full day of talking. "After that, unless somebody's got a plan, people are going to start looking to the farms. And I don't think I have to tell any of you what that's going to look like if it isn't organized."

"It's already starting," Jack said. "Patterson place, two farms over from mine. Argument over a fence line that's been settled for ten years, turned into something with real teeth to it by this afternoon. That's not going to be the last one."

Ethan Walker rubbed a hand over his face, the exhaustion of the last twenty-four hours written plainly across features that had aged, Sarah thought, watching him, what felt like years in a single day. "I've got six officers left who've actually shown up for duty," he said. "Two didn't come back after yesterday — I don't know if they're dealing with their own losses or if they've just decided this isn't their job anymore, and honestly I can't blame either one. Six officers, no working patrol cars, no radios beyond line of sight. We can't police eighteen thousand people and a whole township like that. Not against organized panic. Not against whatever's coming once people realize how bad this really is."

"Then we don't try to police it the old way," Jack said. "We organize it. Get ahead of it before it organizes itself the wrong way." He looked around the circle, weighing, Sarah could see, how much of what he was thinking to say out loud to a group of civilians on the first full day of a catastrophe none of them had asked for. "I've spent eleven years doing exactly this kind of work, just usually somewhere a lot further from home. You want my honest assessment, Mayor?"

"That's why you're standing here."

"Ashwood needs three things inside the next week, or it's going to tear itself apart from the inside before anybody from outside ever gets the chance to threaten it. It needs a way to grow and protect food, fair, so nobody's fighting over three rows of corn. It needs some kind of organized watch — not a posse, not vigilantes, something disciplined, with rules, answerable to you and to Lieutenant Walker here — because there are going to be people coming through this county in the next few weeks who

have already decided the old rules don't apply anymore, and Ashwood needs to be ready for them before they arrive, not after. And it needs people to keep believing there's a reason to hold together at all, instead of every family for itself. That third one." Jack looked, without quite meaning to, toward Lydia, and then toward the dark shape of the church steeple visible over the rooftops behind the square. "That third one might honestly be the hardest of the three."

Sarah spoke up from where she stood at the edge of the circle, her voice quieter than she meant it to be, still raw from the day at Higbee's. "The hospital has maybe two weeks of critical medications left, less for some things. Insulin. Antibiotics. Anything requiring refrigeration, we're on borrowed time the moment that generator runs dry. I don't have a solution for that. I just think everyone standing here needs to understand it, because there are going to be people in this town who die from things that would have been completely treatable a week ago, and that's going to happen whether or not we get everything else right."

No one spoke for a moment. Lydia's pen scratched steadily against her notebook, the only sound in the small, exhausted circle beyond the distant, ordinary evening noise of birds settling into the trees around the square, indifferent, as birds always are, to the collapse of human arrangements.

"All right," Brooks said finally. "Jack — I'm asking you, formally, to start putting together whatever this watch needs to look like. Lieutenant Walker, I want you working with him, not against him — whatever's left of the department needs to fold into whatever gets built, not compete with it. Sarah, I want an honest count of what we have and what we're going to need, and I want you telling me the truth even when the truth is ugly. And Roy—" he turned to the maintenance chief, "—I want to know exactly how long we can keep that hospital running, to the day, so we're not caught by surprise."

He looked around the circle one more time, at faces gone hollow with grief and exhaustion and the particular, disorienting vertigo of people trying to rebuild the rules of civilization in real time with no instruction manual and no one left to ask for help.

"I know none of you signed up for this," he said. "I know yesterday morning every one of us was living an entirely different life. But I've got to be honest with you — I don't think Ashwood is going to get the luxury of easing into whatever's coming. I think whatever's coming is already on its way, and I think it's going to arrive faster than any of us want to believe. So we start tonight."

VII. What Rebecca Found

While the working group met in the square, Rebecca Whitfield sat alone once more in her father's study, watching the same window darken toward evening for the second night in a row, and found herself, for reasons she could not entirely articulate even to herself, drawn at last to the small camcorder on its tripod in the corner.

She had noticed it the night her father disappeared and had not been able to touch it — some superstitious part of her had felt that turning it on, seeing whatever was on it, would make his absence irreversibly, finally real in a way that even his empty chair and his abandoned glasses had not quite managed to. Tonight, with the whole town holding its breath around her and a smell of distant smoke still faintly present in the evening air, she found she no longer had the luxury of that particular fear.

She pressed the small playback button with a hand that was not quite steady, and her father's face filled the tiny screen — recorded, according to the timestamp in the corner, at 9:14 the previous morning, less than six hours before he vanished from a hospital room holding an old woman's hand.

"Church family," his recorded voice said, warm and familiar and utterly, achingly present in a way that made Rebecca's chest constrict painfully, *"if you're seeing this and you weren't at Bible study Tuesday, I want you to hear something I believe with my whole heart. The Lord is coming back. Maybe not today. Maybe not this year. But He is coming, and when He comes, there will be no time to decide what you believe. The decision has to be made before. So today — hear me — today is the day of salvation."*

Rebecca sat very still, watching her father's face on the small screen, hearing words that had been recorded before any of it happened — before the vanishing, before the fire on the northern horizon, before Higbee's Grocery had its windows broken and its shelves stripped bare by people she had known her whole life — and felt something inside her that had been slowly cracking for two days finally, quietly, give way entirely.

"I love you all," her father said, closing, the way he always closed. *"I'll see you Sunday — Lord willing."*

The recording ended. Rebecca sat alone in the dark study for a long time afterward, her father's Bible in her lap, the small screen gone black in front of her, and when she finally spoke aloud, her voice was steadier than she expected it to be, though tears were running freely down her face by then.

"Okay, Dad," she said. "Okay. I hear you now."

She did not fall to her knees in some dramatic conversion in that exact moment — that would come later, in its own time, in its own way, the way Rebecca Whitfield did most important things in her life: slowly, honestly, without performance. But something shifted in her that night that would never fully shift back, a door that had been closed for three years standing, for the first time, unmistakably ajar.

VIII. The Stranger Returns

It was nearly nine o'clock, full dark, when Noah Simmons — who had spent the day, like most of Ashwood's residents, oscillating between numb grief and the frantic, practical business of simply surviving the next few hours — walked the same route behind Ashwood Community Baptist Church that he'd walked two days earlier, drawn there by an impulse he didn't examine too closely.

The stranger was there again, sitting on the same low stone wall, as though he had never left, his satchel beside him, a small oil lantern — one of the few working light sources left in a town gone almost entirely dark — throwing a warm, steady glow across his calm, unhurried face.

"You knew," Noah said, before he'd even fully closed the distance between them, his voice cracking with two days' worth of exhaustion and grief he hadn't yet found a way to release. "Two days ago. You told me it was a good thing I told the truth, that it was about to matter more than I knew. You knew this was coming."

The man regarded him for a long moment in the lantern light, and when he spoke, his voice carried the same strange, gentle calm it had carried before. "I didn't know the day or the hour, son. No one does — not me, not your pastor, not the wisest man who ever lived. That's not a secret God shares. But I've read the same book your parents read every morning at five, and that book told me plainly enough what kind of age we're living in, and what kind of week was likely to follow a night like the one this whole world just had." He paused. "I'm sorry about your mother and father, Noah."

Noah startled — he had not told the man his name, not two days ago and not tonight. "How do you know my name? How do you know about my parents?"

"Small towns," the man said simply, in a tone that offered no further explanation and somehow made Noah feel, rather than suspicious, strangely at peace with not having one. "You've been listening, these last two days. I can see it in your face. That's a harder thing than most people understand — to have the wall come down all at once, with grief on the other side of it instead of gladness. Most folks who come to faith get to grieve their old life slowly, a little at a time, the way you'd let go of a rope hand over hand. You and a lot of folks in this town got the rope cut all at once."

"I don't know how to do this," Noah said, and the words came out smaller than he meant them to, seventeen years old and utterly alone in a dark churchyard, admitting something he would not have admitted to anyone else in Ashwood. "I don't know how to be — whatever it is my parents were. I don't even know if what I feel right now is real faith or just being scared and alone."

"Then start where everybody starts," the man said. "Not with certainty. With honesty. Tell God the truth about what you don't understand, same as you'd tell anyone else. He can carry a lot more honest doubt than He can carry pretend confidence." He reached into his satchel and produced, without ceremony, a small, worn New Testament, offering it across the space between them. "There are people all through this county starting to find Bibles again in empty houses, in church pews, in glove compartments nobody thought twice about for years. I expect you're going to meet a good many of them in the days ahead. You're not going to be as alone as you feel right now, Noah. Not by a long way."

Noah took the small book with both hands, the way a person takes something they intuit, without being told, is more valuable than its size would suggest. When he looked up to thank the man properly, the stone wall beside the lantern was empty, the satchel gone, no sound of footsteps receding into the dark churchyard beyond — only the lantern itself, left behind, still burning steadily on the low stone wall, as though it had been waiting there all along for Noah to come and claim it.

He carried both the lantern and the small Testament home through the dark, empty streets of a town that had, in the space of forty-eight hours, become entirely unrecognizable to him, and for the first time since his mother's tea glass had shattered on the kitchen table, Noah Simmons did not feel entirely alone.

IX. Night, Again

Ashwood went to sleep that second night — those who could sleep at all — in a darkness that no longer felt merely unfamiliar, but had begun to feel, to more than a few of its residents, like a kind of verdict.

Ethan Walker sat once more in his own kitchen, Emily's Bible open on the table in front of him under the light of a camping lantern he'd found in the garage, not reading it, exactly, but no longer entirely avoiding it either — his eyes moving over the same underlined verse in the book of John that Emily had marked years ago, a verse he had walked past a hundred times without ever once stopping to actually read the words: *In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you.*

Sarah Collins finally slept, for the first time in nearly forty hours, in an on-call room at the hospital, too exhausted even for the dreams that would come for her, worse and more frequent, in the weeks ahead.

Jack Reynolds sat on his own front porch with a legal pad and a pencil, sketching, by lantern light, the rough outline of a watch rotation for a defense force that did not yet exist, for a town that had not yet agreed to build one, working with the same patient, methodical focus he had once brought to operational plans that determined whether men came home alive.

And in the town square, in the last hour before midnight, Mayor Daniel Brooks stood alone for a while beneath the old Civil War cannon, looking north toward a horizon still faintly orange against the dark, thinking of every ribbon-cutting and budget meeting and minor zoning dispute that had filled eight years of his mayoralty, all of it suddenly rendered so small, so almost laughably small, against the scale of what his town was now being asked to survive — and thinking, too, with a stubbornness that surprised him, that small towns had survived worse than this before, in their own ways, across the long, difficult sweep of history, and that if Ashwood, Ohio was going to be tested the way it was clearly about to be tested, he intended to make sure it was tested as one town, together, for as long as he had breath left to insist on it.

The smoke on the horizon had not cleared by morning. It would not clear for weeks. But somewhere beneath it, in a town that had lost its pastor, its power, its government, and very nearly its own sense of who it was within the space of forty-eight hours, the first quiet outlines of something else were beginning, almost invisibly, to take shape — not a plan yet, not really, not even hope, not quite. Just the stubborn, ordinary determination of people who had decided, each in their own private way and for their own private reasons, that they were not yet ready to stop being neighbors to one another, whatever the cost of that decision turned out to be.

Part Two — The Collapse

ASHES OF AMERICA — BOOK ONE AFTER THE VANISHING by Dr. Paul Crawford

CHAPTER FIVE

The Last Broadcast

"Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish." — Psalm 146:3–4 (KJV)

I. Frank Pelletier's Basement

By Thursday evening, three days after the vanishing and two after the fire had fallen on twenty-three American cities, Frank Pelletier's basement on Cherry Street had become the single most important room in Ashwood, Ohio, though it looked, to anyone who saw it for the first time, like nothing more than an old man's cluttered workshop — a workbench crowded with vacuum tubes and coiled wire, a wall of yellowed call-sign certificates going back to 1961, and, at the center of it all, the great hulking radio set Frank had built with his own hands nearly fifty years earlier and had never once imagined the entire remaining civil order of his country would come to depend on.

He had been keeping a log since Tuesday night, filling page after page of a spiral notebook with call signs, fragments, half-heard transmissions from operators as far away as Tennessee and as close as the next county over — a patchwork picture of a nation trying, in ten thousand scattered, uncoordinated ways, to understand what had happened to it. Most of what came through was noise, rumor, panic. But at 8:52 that Thursday evening, scanning through the emergency frequencies out of habit more than expectation, Frank caught something different: a signal steadier and clearer than anything he'd picked up in three days, carrying the unmistakable cadence of an official broadcast rather than a frightened civilian on a borrowed rig.

"—this is an emergency broadcast on behalf of the Acting Federal Emergency Council, authorized under continuity-of-government protocols. Please stand by for a statement."

Frank's hands, steady from fifty years of practice, shook only slightly as he reached for the volume knob and then for the door at the top of his basement stairs, calling up to his neighbor's boy, who had been posted, at Mayor Brooks's request, to run word to the town hall the instant anything worth hearing came through the set.

Within twenty minutes, close to sixty people had crowded into and around Frank Pelletier's small house on Cherry Street — Brooks, Ethan Walker, Jack Reynolds, Sarah Collins pulled from the hospital for the second time in two days, Lydia Hayes with her notebook already open, and dozens more residents who had heard the word passed hand to hand, house to house, in the only way news traveled anymore. They stood shoulder to shoulder in Frank's narrow backyard, in his kitchen, on his porch steps, straining to hear a radio voice carried out through an open basement window on a warm July evening that smelled, as every evening now smelled, faintly of distant smoke.

The voice that finally came through, after several minutes of dead air and crackling static, belonged to a man who identified himself only as Deputy Secretary Aldous Reyes, speaking, he said, on behalf of a Federal Emergency Council operating from an undisclosed secure location, in the absence of any surviving officials with a clearer claim to executive authority.

"To the citizens of the United States," the voice said, thin and distorted but unmistakably human, unmistakably exhausted, "I wish I had better news to bring you tonight than I do. As of this broadcast, we have not been able to establish contact with the President, the Vice President, the Speaker of the

House, or any other individual in the constitutional line of succession. We believe — though I want to be honest that this is a belief, not a confirmed fact — that Washington, D.C. and the vast majority of federal continuity infrastructure was lost in the strikes of Tuesday night. Efforts to reconstitute a functioning national government are ongoing, but I have to tell you plainly: those efforts are not going well, and I cannot promise you when, or whether, they will succeed."

A ripple of sound moved through the crowd gathered around Frank Pelletier's house — not screaming, not this time; three days of accumulating catastrophe had worn most of Ashwood past the capacity for screaming — but a low, collective sound of grief so total it had nowhere left to go but silence.

"Regional governors and state authorities are being asked to assume emergency powers within their own borders wherever possible," the voice went on. "The National Guard, where it remains organized and equipped, has been directed to prioritize the protection of remaining population centers, food distribution infrastructure, and medical facilities. I will tell you honestly that in many parts of the country, that Guard presence does not currently exist in any meaningful, coordinated form. Local law enforcement and local government are, for the time being, the only functioning authority most American communities are going to have. I am sorry. I wish I could tell you otherwise."

The transmission held for perhaps ninety more seconds — a fragmented list of frequencies where further updates might, in theory, be broadcast; an appeal for calm that even the man speaking it seemed to understand was, at this point, more hope than instruction; a final, almost unbearably human pause before the voice said, quietly, off whatever careful script had guided the rest of the statement, "God help us all," and then dissolved into static that Frank Pelletier worked at for the rest of the night, and for many nights after, and never once managed to recover.

It was the last official broadcast from any level of the federal government that Ashwood, Ohio would ever receive.

II. What Was Left of Order

Daniel Brooks stood on Frank Pelletier's front porch afterward, the crowd around him quiet in a way that felt heavier than the loudest panic could have, and understood that he was no longer, in any meaningful sense, the mayor of a town within a state within a nation. He was, as of that moment, the highest remaining functioning authority that eighteen thousand people were ever likely to see.

"The powers that be are ordained of God," Pastor Whitfield had preached once, years ago, from Romans thirteen, in a sermon Brooks remembered now with startling clarity though he had not thought of it once in the years between — *"for there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God."* Brooks had heard that verse a hundred times across a lifetime of Sunday mornings and had never once imagined it would come back to him standing on a neighbor's porch in the ruin of everything, wondering whether the mantle it described had somehow, impossibly, settled onto his own tired shoulders.

"Folks," he said, and his voice, though hoarse, carried clearly across the quiet yard. "You heard what I heard. There isn't a government coming to help us. Not this week. Maybe not for a long while yet, if ever, not in the shape we're used to. I'm not going to stand here and pretend that isn't the worst thing

any of us has ever heard, on top of everything else this week has already cost us." He paused, looking out over faces he had known his entire adult life — faces that had elected him three times to a job he'd never particularly wanted and had never imagined would come to this. "But I want to say something else, and I want you to hear it plain. This town does not need Washington to tell it how to look after its own. It never has. We are going to organize. We are going to protect what we've got, and we are going to share it fairly, and we are going to keep this community standing on its own two feet until whatever comes next — whatever kind of country we end up rebuilding, or whatever we end up becoming instead — arrives to meet us. Starting tomorrow morning, I want every able-bodied adult in this town at the high school gymnasium at eight o'clock. We're going to organize a watch, a food council, and whatever else this town needs, and we're going to do it together, because together is the only way any of us is going to make it through what's coming."

III. The Rumor Mill

What the broadcast did not do — could not do, given how little real information it actually contained — was answer the questions that had been multiplying across Ashwood for three days like weeds through cracked pavement. In the absence of hard fact, rumor filled every space fact left empty, and by the time Lydia Hayes made her way home from Frank Pelletier's porch that night, she had already heard, within the span of a single walk across town, no fewer than eleven distinct and mutually contradictory accounts of what was actually happening beyond Ashwood's borders.

She heard that the attack had come from a single nation, and she heard, from an equally confident source twenty minutes later, that it had come from an alliance of no fewer than seven. She heard that the President was alive and directing operations from a secret bunker beneath the Rocky Mountains, and she heard, from a man who swore he'd gotten it from a cousin in the National Guard, that the President had been among the vanished on Tuesday afternoon, having been, unbeknownst to the public, a quietly devout believer his entire term in office. She heard that foreign troops had already landed on the West Coast, that martial law had been declared in every state, that the vanishings had been some kind of secret government weapons test gone catastrophically wrong, that they had been the work of extraterrestrials, that they had been, as more than one shaken, grieving voice insisted to her with a certainty that startled her, exactly and precisely what the Bible had always said they would be.

"For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be," an elderly woman named Ruth Colby quoted to her outside the Gazette office that night, without preamble, holding a worn Bible against her chest the way a person holds something that has suddenly become far more valuable than it was a week ago. "That's Matthew twenty-four, verse twenty-one, young lady. My mother used to make me memorize that whole chapter as a girl, and I thought it was the most useless thing she ever asked of me. I'd give anything to tell her how wrong I was."

Lydia wrote it all down — not because she believed every account, but because she had come, over three exhausting days, to understand that in the absence of any verifiable truth, the stories people chose to believe were themselves becoming a kind of truth: a record of what an entire community, unmoored from every institution it had ever depended on, was doing with its terror. She began, that night, drafting

what would become the second emergency edition of the Ashwood Gazette — a single mimeographed sheet, since the press itself now required hand-cranking to run at all, that did not try to answer the unanswerable questions swirling through the town, but instead simply recorded, plainly and honestly, what was and was not currently known, and what remained, for now, only rumor.

FACT, she wrote at the top of one column, by lantern light, her handwriting steadier now than it had been three nights earlier. RUMOR, she wrote beside it. And beneath the second heading, after a long pause, she added a third: WHAT WE CANNOT YET KNOW — BUT MUST DECIDE HOW TO LIVE WITHOUT KNOWING.

IV. A Bible Study in a Kitchen

Rebecca Whitfield had not intended, when she invited Sarah Collins and Noah Simmons to the parsonage that Thursday evening, to start anything as formal as what it would eventually become. She had meant only to share her father's recording with two people who, in different ways over the last three days, had each found their way to her — Sarah, drawn by some instinct she couldn't fully name to the daughter of the man whose empty operating room she still could not stop seeing when she closed her eyes; Noah, who had shown up on the parsonage porch that afternoon holding a small worn New Testament he said a stranger had given him, asking, with the raw, unguarded honesty of a boy who had run out of anywhere else to put his grief, whether Miss Whitfield might help him understand some of it.

They sat around the parsonage kitchen table by lantern light — Rebecca, Sarah, Noah, and, arriving a little after seven with visible hesitance in the doorway, Ethan Walker, who had come only intending to drop off a spare battery lantern Rebecca had asked to borrow, and had found himself, for reasons he did not examine too closely, still sitting at the table an hour later.

Rebecca played the recording again — her father's recorded voice filling the small kitchen the way it had filled the study two nights before — and then, haltingly at first, began to talk, not as a preacher's daughter performing certainty she didn't feel, but as someone thinking out loud through a door that had stood shut for three years and had cracked open, in the space of a single terrible week, wider than she would ever have believed possible.

"I used to tell my students that when this life is over, it's over," she said quietly, turning her father's worn Bible over in her hands. "I said it with total confidence, three days ago, in front of a whole classroom. I think about that a lot now." She opened the Bible to a page she had marked earlier that day, a passage she'd found herself returning to over and over since watching her father's recording. "This is from Second Peter, chapter three. My dad had this whole page nearly worn through, underlined a dozen times. *But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.*" She looked up at the small circle of faces around the table, lantern light catching the tears she no longer tried to hide. "I read that this afternoon and thought about the sky over Cleveland. I don't know what to do with that except admit that my father was not describing a fairy tale. He was describing something real, and it's happening, and I spent years mocking him for it."

Sarah sat very still, her hands wrapped around a mug of tea gone cold an hour ago, thinking of an operating table and a pile of empty scrubs and a scalpel clattering onto sterile drapes. "I don't know how to reconcile any of this with what I've spent my whole career believing," she said slowly. "I've built my entire life on the idea that everything has a physical explanation if you look hard enough. And I keep looking for the physical explanation for what I saw in that operating room, Rebecca, I've looked for three straight days, and there isn't one. There's only the explanation your father would have given me, and I resisted it for exactly the reason you'd expect — because if it's true, it means I was wrong about everything that actually matters."

Noah, who had been quiet for most of the evening, turning the small New Testament over in his hands, finally spoke, reading haltingly from a page he had marked with a torn scrap of paper. "I found this one today," he said. "Romans, chapter ten. *That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.*" He looked up, his voice unsteady. "I said that. In the garage. The night everything happened, I didn't have the words for it, not really, but I think I said something close to that, without even knowing what verse it was. Is that — is that how it actually works? It's that simple?"

"It's that simple to receive," Rebecca said softly, surprising herself with how steady the answer came, as though some part of her had been holding onto her father's teaching all along, waiting only for permission to speak it out loud again. "It was never simple for Him to provide. That's the part I think I spent three years refusing to look at honestly — what it actually cost, so that it could be that simple for us."

Ethan had said almost nothing the entire evening, sitting slightly apart from the others with his forearms braced on the table, Emily's Bible — the one he had, without quite admitting it to himself, begun carrying with him the same way Rebecca carried her father's — resting unopened in front of him. When he finally spoke, his voice was rougher than he intended.

"My wife used to leave this open on the counter every morning," he said. "I walked past it for nine years and never once read more than a sentence at a time, usually by accident. I found this yesterday." He turned the Bible around, sliding it toward the center of the table, one passage underlined in Emily's careful hand, a note in the margin dated almost two years earlier: *Praying for E. Lord, soften his heart in Your time.* "First Peter, chapter three. *Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives.*" His voice caught, and he did not try to hide it, not in this room, not tonight. "She was doing that. The whole time. Not arguing with me. Not nagging me about church. Just — living it in front of me, every single day, and praying, apparently, for two years that it would be enough. And I was too busy being right about everything to notice."

No one spoke for a long moment. Outside, somewhere down the darkened street, a dog barked once and fell silent, and the lantern on the table guttered slightly in a draft from the open window, throwing long shadows across four faces that had, each in their own private and particular way, begun the same slow, difficult turn toward a door none of them had expected to walk through this week.

"I'm not saying I believe all of it," Ethan said finally, closing the Bible gently, the way a person closes something newly precious. "I'm saying I don't know how to keep not believing it. Not after this week.

Not after watching a whole city burn on the horizon and finding my daughter's floatie in an empty pool and my wife's coffee gone cold on the counter with no explanation this world has ever managed to give me." He looked around the table at the others — Rebecca, Sarah, Noah, three people he had known for years or for days, bound together now by a grief and a searching none of them had chosen. "I think I need somebody to help me figure out how you actually do this. How you actually believe something instead of just wishing it were true."

"Then keep coming back," Rebecca said, and for the first time in three days, something that was almost a smile touched the corner of her mouth. "That's how my dad always answered that question, when people asked him. Keep showing up. Keep reading. Keep asking. The answer isn't a single moment, usually. It's a thousand small ones, stacked up, until one day you look back and realize you crossed over somewhere along the way without quite noticing exactly when."

Before they parted for the night, Rebecca turned to one more page she had marked that afternoon, something her father had underlined so many times the ink had nearly worn through the thin paper beneath it. "One more," she said. "This is the one he quoted more than any other, my whole life. Every altar call, every hospital bed, every conversation he ever had with somebody who wasn't sure. Ephesians two, verses eight and nine. *For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.*" She looked up at the three faces around the table, lantern light catching the wet track of a tear she made no effort to wipe away. "He used to say that verse was the whole gospel in two sentences. Not what you do. What was already done for you, freely given, and all you have to do is reach out and take it."

Noah was the first to break the silence that followed, his voice small but steadier than it had been all evening. "I want to actually say it," he said. "Out loud. Not just read about it in a book somebody handed me in the dark. I want to actually say it, the way it's supposed to be said."

Rebecca reached across the table and took his hand, and Sarah, after a moment's hesitation that surprised her more than it surprised anyone else at the table, took his other one, and Ethan bowed his head without being asked, the way a man does something his body remembers even when his mind has spent years insisting it doesn't believe in it anymore. Noah's prayer was not eloquent. It was halting, and it repeated itself, and it broke twice into tears he did not try to hide — but it was, Rebecca would write in her own private notebook weeks later, one of the most honest things she had ever heard spoken aloud in her father's kitchen, in nineteen years of hearing prayers spoken in that exact room.

They sat together at the kitchen table until well past midnight, four unlikely companions reading by lantern light from two worn, familiar Bibles and one small new Testament, in a town that had lost its power, its government, and very nearly its own sense of what tomorrow was supposed to look like — and none of them, that night, would have called what was happening around that table a revival. But it was, in its small, quiet, unremarkable way, exactly that: the first gathering of what would, in the difficult months ahead, come to be known throughout Ashwood and the surrounding county as the Remnant.

V. Jack's First Patrol

While the small gathering unfolded at the parsonage, Jack Reynolds spent the evening walking the perimeter of what he had begun, in his own private notes, to call Ashwood's defensible boundary — the ring of roads and fields and low hills that marked the practical edge of the town's ability to protect itself, if protection ever became necessary.

He was not alone. Six men had shown up that afternoon at his farmhouse in response to word Mayor Brooks had quietly spread through Ethan Walker's remaining officers — men Jack had specifically asked for, having spent the previous day taking careful, informal stock of who in Ashwood had relevant experience: two other veterans, a retired state trooper, a hunting guide who knew the surrounding woods better than anyone alive, and two younger men, strong and willing, who had no training at all but the right kind of steadiness in their eyes.

"This isn't about being heroes," Jack told them, standing in his own barn in the fading evening light, the same flat, level voice he'd once used briefing men before missions that mattered a great deal more than any of them had wanted to admit at the time. "This is about making sure that when trouble does come to this county — and it is coming, sooner than any of us want to believe — Ashwood isn't caught flat-footed the way it was caught flat-footed on Tuesday. We watch. We report. We de-escalate wherever we possibly can. We use force only when there's no other honest choice left, and we answer to Mayor Brooks and to Lieutenant Walker, not to ourselves. Anybody who's looking for an excuse to play soldier can leave right now, because that's exactly the kind of man who gets good people killed."

They walked the perimeter together as dusk settled, identifying choke points, blind approaches, the handful of roads that offered any kind of natural advantage to a small number of defenders against a larger, less organized force. It was, Jack reflected privately, exactly the kind of work he had spent eleven years doing on the other side of the world, in terrain that had never once felt like home the way this gentle, familiar Ohio farmland felt like home — and it struck him, walking the fence line his own grandfather had built with his hands two generations earlier, as one of the strangest and most sorrowful ironies of his entire life, that the skills which had cost him two men and a decade of sleepless nights in a village whose name he still would not speak aloud were about to become the very thing standing, however imperfectly, between his own hometown and whatever darkness was gathering beyond it.

"The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer," Walt Henderson had said to him that morning, unprompted, quoting the words the way a man quotes something memorized so long ago it no longer feels like quotation at all, *"my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower."* Psalm eighteen, verse two, Walt had told him, when Jack asked, without a trace of embarrassment at knowing it by heart at seventy-four years old. Jack had not answered him directly. But he had carried the words with him all day, turning them over the way he turned over a piece of unfamiliar terrain, testing them for weaknesses he could not, try as he might, quite manage to find.

VI. The Pastor Who Remained

Not every pulpit in Ashwood had stood empty on Tuesday afternoon, and nowhere was that fact weighing more heavily by Thursday night than in the modest brick sanctuary of First Community

Church on the west side of town, where the Reverend Ray Doss sat alone in the dark, staring at a Bible he had preached from for nineteen years and had rarely, if he was honest with himself, actually opened outside of Sunday mornings.

Ray Doss was fifty-two years old, well-liked, an easy and comfortable speaker who had built First Community into one of the larger congregations in the county through a steady diet of encouragement, practical life advice, and sermons carefully calibrated never to make anyone in the pews too uncomfortable for too long. He had never once, in nineteen years, preached on judgment. He had never preached on the blood of the cross except in the gentlest, most abstract terms. He had built, without ever quite admitting it to himself, a church that people liked rather than a church that told people the truth — and on Tuesday afternoon, while eleven members of his own congregation vanished from their pews, their Sunday school classrooms, their positions on the church's finance committee, Ray Doss had remained standing exactly where he always stood, in the pulpit, having felt nothing at all.

He had spent three days since telling himself a dozen different stories about what had happened — a mass hysteria event, some kind of coordinated disappearance no one yet understood, anything other than the explanation that had been sitting, unavoidable, in the book on the pulpit stand in front of him the entire time he'd been preaching. It was Thursday night's broadcast, more than anything else, that finally broke through the last of his denial — not the news of the government's collapse, but a single sentence from an elderly deacon named Otis Vance, one of the few members of his congregation who had also remained, who found him sitting alone in the dark sanctuary afterward and said, without cruelty, only sorrow, "Ray, I think we've been preaching about a God we never actually surrendered to. I think that's why we're both still here."

Ray Doss opened his Bible that night for the first time in longer than he could honestly account for, not searching for a sermon, but searching, with a terror he had not felt since he was a boy, for himself — and he found it, eventually, in the book of Revelation, chapter three, a passage addressed to a church he had read a hundred times in seminary and had never once applied to his own life: *I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.*

He wept in that empty sanctuary until nearly dawn, and when the sun finally rose, gray and smoke-hazed over a church that would never again feel to him the way it had felt on Monday, Ray Doss did not leave. He stayed, and he began — haltingly, honestly, for the first time in nineteen years of ministry — to actually read, and to actually pray, and to ask a God he had spent two decades talking about without ever truly meeting whether there was still time, whether *whosoever* in John three sixteen still meant what it had always plainly said it meant, even for a man who had stood in a pulpit every Sunday and somehow missed it. He would not have an answer he trusted for several more days yet. But he no longer preached, that following Sunday, the kind of sermon he had always preached before. He stood in front of the handful of congregants who remained, mostly newcomers now, mostly people who had never set foot in his church before this week, and he told them the truth, plainly, for the first time in his ministry: that he had been their pastor and had not, until three days ago, been truly saved himself, and that if any of them were sitting in those pews still uncertain, still comfortable, still assuming they had more time than they actually had, he needed them to hear, from a man who had learned it the hardest possible way, that comfortable was not the same thing as safe.

VII. The Question Sarah Could Not Answer

Sarah returned to the hospital past midnight, exhausted in a way that went past her body now and reached somewhere deeper, and found Dana Pruitt still on shift, sitting alone in the break room with a photograph of her uncle Harold in her hands.

"He asked Jesus to save him three days before he disappeared," Dana said quietly, without looking up, as Sarah sat down across from her. "The hospice volunteer told me, after. Said Uncle Harold prayed with her at two in the morning, all alone, no fanfare, nobody watching. Seventy-nine years old and he waited until the very last week of his life to finally say yes." She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, a small, exhausted, disbelieving laugh escaping her despite the tears. "I used to think people who found God on their deathbed were just scared, taking out some kind of insurance policy at the last minute. I don't think that anymore, Sarah. I think my uncle Harold got the best deal any of us have ever heard of, and I think I'm angry that it took me almost losing him — actually losing him — to understand that."

Sarah did not have an answer for her. She sat with Dana instead, in the quiet break room, in the failing light of a hospital running on borrowed time, and thought about the passage Rebecca had read aloud that evening — *the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night* — and found herself unable, for the first time in her adult life, to dismiss a claim simply because it defied every physical explanation she had ever trusted.

She did not pray that night. She was not ready, not yet, and she would not pretend otherwise even to herself. But she picked up, before she finally slept, the small pocket New Testament Marcus Chen had kept in his lab coat pocket every day she had known him — found by a nurse cleaning out his locker and set aside, out of some collective, unspoken instinct, for Sarah specifically to have — and she read, for the first time in her life with something other than academic detachment, the opening words of the book of John. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.*

She read until the lantern burned low, and when she finally slept, it was the first night in three that her dreams did not return her to an empty operating table.

VIII. What Ashwood Chose

By Friday morning, close to nine hundred of Ashwood's remaining residents had gathered at the high school gymnasium, spilling out onto the football field where the Wildcats had been scheduled, in a life that now felt impossibly distant, to begin two-a-days within the month. Daniel Brooks stood at midfield with a bullhorn someone had produced from the athletic department's storage closet, its batteries, mercifully, old enough to have survived the pulse, and laid out, plainly and without embellishment, the shape of the plan the working group had spent two days assembling: a rotating farm labor and protection council, headed jointly by Jack Reynolds and a respected local farmer named Curtis Boyd; a defense watch under Jack's direct organization, answerable to Ethan Walker's remaining department; a medical rationing plan drawn up by Sarah Collins, painful in its necessity but fair in its structure; and a

communications role, filled by Frank Pelletier and, increasingly, by Lydia Hayes, whose emergency editions of the Gazette had become, in the space of three days, the closest thing the town possessed to a trusted, verified source of truth in a landscape otherwise drowning in rumor.

It was not a perfect plan. Brooks said as much, standing at midfield in the gray morning light, smoke still smudging the northern horizon behind him. But it was a plan built by neighbors, for neighbors, in the absence of any government left to build one for them — and as the crowd began, in small clusters, to sort itself into the working groups the plan called for, Lydia Hayes stood at the edge of the field with her notebook, recording, as she had recorded everything else that terrible week, a moment she suspected, correctly, that history would eventually want to remember.

"When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him," Ruth Colby said to her, unprompted, passing by with her worn Bible still clutched against her chest — Isaiah, chapter fifty-nine, verse nineteen, she added, the way she seemed to add a reference to everything now, as though she had spent decades quietly storing away exactly the verses this week would finally call her to use. It was the same verse Lydia would later choose, without quite knowing why, to close her account of that difficult, hopeful Friday morning.

The federal government of the United States, for all practical purposes, no longer existed. The rumors would continue, in ever stranger and more elaborate forms, for weeks and months to come, filling the silence where verified fact should have been. But standing on a football field in the gray, smoke-hazed morning light, watching eighteen thousand frightened, grieving neighbors begin, however imperfectly, to organize themselves into something that might yet hold — Lydia Hayes wrote, in the notebook she would keep faithfully for the rest of her life, words that would eventually open the second chapter of the history she spent the following decade compiling:

We had lost our government. We had not yet lost each other. And in the ashes of everything else, that turned out to be the one thing worth building on.

ASHES OF AMERICA — BOOK ONE AFTER THE VANISHING by Dr. Paul Crawford

CHAPTER SIX

The Empty Church

"The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?... One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to enquire in his temple." — Psalm 27:1, 4 (KJV)

I. The Walk to Church Street

Saturday morning came to Ashwood gray and close, the smoke haze from the north having settled overnight into a low, persistent film across the sky that made the sun look, even at nine in the morning, like something viewed through a dirty window. Rebecca Whitfield walked the six blocks from the parsonage to Ashwood Community Baptist Church carrying her father's Bible under one arm, the way she had carried it every day since Thursday night, and found, as she turned the corner onto Church Street, that her feet had slowed without her quite deciding to slow them.

She had not been inside the sanctuary itself since the vanishing. She had been in her father's study at the parsonage a hundred times in the four days since, had watched his recorded message, had sat with Sarah and Noah and Ethan around the kitchen table reading his underlined verses by lantern light — but the church itself, the actual sanctuary where she had been baptized at eleven years old, where she had sat through a thousand Sunday mornings alternately bored and moved and resentful and, in her secret heart, always a little bit afraid that everything he preached might turn out to be true, she had avoided entirely. Some part of her had understood, without being able to articulate it, that the parsonage held her father's memory, but the church held something larger and more frightening: the evidence, physical and undeniable, of everything he had spent his life proclaiming.

The front doors stood unlocked, the way they always had — Caleb Whitfield had never in thirty-one years locked the doors of his church during daylight hours, on the theory, which he had repeated to Rebecca more times than she could count growing up, that a church too afraid to leave its doors open to a hurting world had already failed at the one job it actually had. Rebecca pushed through them now into a foyer gone dim and cool and utterly silent, dust already beginning to settle faintly across the visitor's welcome table, a stack of bulletins from the previous Sunday still sitting exactly where a greeter had left them, curling slightly at the edges in the July humidity.

She stood there for a long moment before she made herself walk further in, toward the sanctuary doors, and pushed them open.

II. What the Sanctuary Held

The sanctuary of Ashwood Community Baptist Church seated three hundred and forty people on a good Sunday, and on the last ordinary Sunday it had ever held, four days before the vanishing, it had been nearly full — the choir robed and singing, the Sunday school classes filing in for the children's sermon, ushers moving quietly up and down the aisles with offering plates. Rebecca stood now in the back of that same sanctuary and took in, slowly, the evidence of exactly what had happened in this room at 3:17 the previous Tuesday afternoon, four days too late for her to have witnessed it herself.

The Tuesday evening Bible study — her father's smaller gathering, nineteen or twenty faithful souls who could not make Wednesdays — had been meeting not in the sanctuary itself but in the fellowship hall down the hall, and it was there, more than anywhere else in the building, that the evidence sat waiting for her, undisturbed, because no one from the church had yet found the strength to come and see it, and looters, whatever else they had stripped from Ashwood's grocery stores and gas stations, had apparently found nothing in a fellowship hall worth the trouble of breaking in for.

Rebecca walked down the short hallway and pushed open the fellowship hall door, and stopped in the doorway with her hand pressed hard against the frame.

Folding chairs, arranged in their usual loose semicircle, sat exactly as they had been arranged for the Tuesday study her father had never gotten to lead. And scattered among them — on seat cushions, on the worn carpet beneath, in small crumpled heaps that told, more clearly than any account Roger Delacroix or the emergency broadcast or anyone else had managed to tell her, the true and total scale of what had happened — lay the clothing of at least a dozen people who had come early to set up chairs and pour coffee and wait for a Bible study that had begun exactly on schedule and had never, in any sense that mattered, finished.

A cardigan on a chair. A pair of reading glasses on the floor beside a Bible left open to whatever passage its owner had been reviewing in advance. A child's small shoes — Rebecca recognized them, with a jolt, as belonging to six-year-old Sophie Marsh, whose mother ran the church nursery and who must have brought Sophie along that evening rather than leave her home alone — sitting neatly side by side near the coffee station, as though the little girl had simply stepped out of them to go somewhere barefoot and had never come back for them.

Rebecca stood in the doorway for a long time, not moving, feeling something in her chest that she recognized, distantly, as the same sensation she had felt watching her father's recorded video three nights earlier — the sensation of a wall she had spent years carefully maintaining finally, completely, giving way.

"Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left," she said aloud, quietly, to the empty room, surprising herself with how easily the verse from Matthew twenty-four came back to her, decades after she'd last bothered to memorize it as a child in Sunday school. *"Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken, and the other left."*

She had heard her father preach that passage a hundred times. She had rolled her eyes at it, privately, more times than she wanted to admit. Standing now in a room full of empty clothing where a Bible study had been quietly, silently interrupted by the return of Jesus Christ, Rebecca Whitfield understood, with a clarity that arrived less like a thought and more like a physical blow, that she had spent years mocking the single most literal, most plainly documented prophecy in the entire book her father had devoted his life to teaching.

She moved slowly around the room, cataloguing what she found the way she imagined Lydia Hayes might catalogue a scene for the paper, though her purpose was nothing so professional — she simply could not make herself leave without knowing whose lives, exactly, had ended in this room, not in death, but in a departure so much stranger than death that Ashwood still had no settled word for it. A man's reading glasses and a marked-up study Bible belonged, she was fairly sure, to Otis Vance's late brother-in-law, a retired postal carrier named Herb Calloway who had never missed a Tuesday study in the eleven years Rebecca could remember. A woman's cardigan, folded so neatly across the back of a chair that Rebecca wondered whether its owner had somehow known, in her last conscious instant on earth, exactly how she wanted to leave the room behind, belonged to Grace Pemberton, the church's longtime pianist, who had played "It Is Well with My Soul" at Rebecca's mother's funeral six years earlier with a tenderness Rebecca had never forgotten. A single worn hymnal lay open on the floor near

the coffee station to page two hundred and eighty-six — "Are You Washed in the Blood" — as though its owner had set it down mid-note to go forward and never returned to retrieve it.

She found, tucked half beneath a folding chair, a spiral notebook belonging to a woman named Carol Ann Pruitt — no relation, as it happened, to Dana or to Harold, simply one of the countless overlapping Pruitt families that populated half the phone directory in a county this small — filled with careful notes from weeks of prior studies, questions jotted in the margins, a prayer list with more than a dozen names on it, several of which Rebecca now recognized, with a fresh ache, as people who had also vanished that same afternoon, their prayers apparently answered in the most literal and complete way prayers had ever been answered in the history of Ashwood Community Baptist Church. On the notebook's final page, dated the previous Sunday, Carol Ann had written a single line beneath that week's sermon notes, underlined twice: *Pastor said today might be the day. He says that every week. I wonder if he actually believes it, or if it's just something preachers say.*

Rebecca closed the notebook gently and held it against her chest for a long moment, understanding that she now knew the answer to Carol Ann Pruitt's question better than Carol Ann herself ever would have imagined possible, and wishing, with an ache that had nowhere left to go, that she could somehow reach back four days and tell her: *he believed it. He believed it more than he believed almost anything else in this world. I only wish I had believed him sooner, so I could have told you myself.*

III. The Pastor's Study

She found her way, eventually, to the small office off the sanctuary that her father had used for church business — a different room from the study at the parsonage, more formal, lined with filing cabinets and reference books rather than the comfortable clutter of home. It was here, she knew, that he had kept thirty-one years of ministry records: sermon notes going back to his very first church outside Dayton, correspondence, counseling notes, and, in a locked bottom drawer of his desk that Rebecca had to force open with a letter opener she found in the top drawer, something she had not expected to find at all.

The drawer held a single black lockbox, unlocked, its key sitting on top of it as though her father had left it there deliberately, at some point, for exactly this occasion. Inside, carefully organized in labeled folders, Rebecca found the accumulated ministry of her father's entire adult life, prepared, she understood almost immediately, with a deliberateness that took her breath away: thirty years of handwritten sermon outlines, cross-referenced by topic and by Scripture passage; a stack of DVDs, each labeled by date, going back nearly a decade, recordings of full Sunday sermons her father had apparently been quietly archiving for reasons Rebecca had never once asked him about; a newer stack of flash drives, more recent, containing — she would discover later, once she found a way to power a laptop — recordings of the shorter messages he'd begun making for the church website in just the last two years; and, at the very bottom of the box, a single sealed envelope with her name written across the front in her father's careful, familiar hand.

REBECCA — TO BE OPENED ONLY IF THE LORD HAS COME AND YOU ARE STILL HERE.

She sat down hard in her father's desk chair, the envelope in her hands, and did not open it right away. She simply held it, the way she had held his empty Bible in the study three nights earlier, understanding

with a fresh, staggering weight exactly what it represented: her father, sometime in the past — she would find, reading the letter inside, that it had been written nearly four years earlier, not long after their last real conversation at his kitchen table — had sat down and written a letter to his own daughter on the specific and deliberate assumption that when the Rapture came, as he was entirely certain it would, Rebecca would still be here to read it. He had not simply hoped she would come to faith eventually. He had planned, with the same careful thoroughness he brought to every sermon he had ever preached, for the specific and devastating possibility that she would not — and had made sure that even his own absence would still be doing the work of reaching her.

IV. The Letter

She opened it at last, her hands unsteady, and read her father's handwriting by the gray light coming through the office's single window.

My dearest Rebecca,

If you are reading this, then it has happened, and I am gone, and you are still here — which means that everything I have spent my life believing and preaching has just been proven true in the most painful way I could ever have imagined for you to learn it. I have prayed, every single day since you told me at my kitchen table that you no longer believed, that this letter would never need to be read. I have prayed harder than I have ever prayed for anything in my life that you would come to Christ on your own, in your own time, so that this moment would never come to pass. But I have also understood, as a father who loves his daughter more than his own life, that I needed to prepare for the possibility that my prayers, this side of eternity, would not be answered the way I hoped — and so I am writing to you now, from a moment in time you cannot see, to tell you the things I most need you to know.

First: I love you. I have never once, not for a single day since you were placed in my arms, stopped loving you completely, and nothing you ever said to me about what you believed or didn't believe ever changed that for even a moment. If you remember nothing else from this letter, remember that.

Second: everything was true. Not most of it. Not the parts that were convenient or comfortable. All of it — the cross, the resurrection, the promise of His return, every word I ever preached from that pulpit that you rolled your eyes at as a girl and argued with as a woman. I know that now costs you something enormous to hear, because it means you have lost, in a single moment, both your father and the last of whatever comfort you found in believing this world simply ends when this life ends. I am so sorry for that pain, Rebecca. I would have given anything to spare you from learning it this way.

Third, and most important: it is not too late for you. That is the whole reason I am writing this letter instead of simply trusting you to find your own way to these same conclusions eventually. The Scripture is plain on this point, plainer than almost anything else in it. John three, verse sixteen — you memorized it as a little girl, I remember teaching it to you myself, though I doubt you remember the words anymore: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Whosoever, Rebecca. Not whosoever who never doubted. Not whosoever who never mocked their father at his own kitchen table. Whosoever. That word was written for exactly the moment you are standing in right now.

Second Corinthians five, verse seventeen, says that if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. Whatever you have believed, whatever you have said, whatever distance has stood between you and the God I have spent my life serving — none of it disqualifies you from that promise. It was never about being good enough to earn your way back. It was only ever about being willing to reach for the hand that has been reaching for you your entire life.

I do not know what the world looks like as you read this. I suspect, given everything I understand from Scripture about what follows this event, that it is a far darker and far harder world than the one I am writing to you from tonight. I am sorry that I cannot be there to walk through it with you. But I want you to know something else, something I believe with everything in me: God has not abandoned you simply because I am gone. My voice was only ever an echo of His. Now that the echo has fallen silent, I pray you will finally hear the original.

I love you, Rebecca. I have never stopped praying for you, not for one single day, and even now, wherever I am when you read these words, I have not stopped. Come home. He is waiting, and so, in whatever way remains possible for a father who has already gone ahead, am I.

Your father, who loves you completely, Caleb

V. What Was Passed Down

Rebecca sat in her father's desk chair for a long time after she finished reading, the letter open in her lap, tears falling freely onto pages she was careful, even in her grief, not to smear or damage — the last physical words she would ever receive from her father, and she understood, holding them, that she would keep this letter for the rest of her life, would probably be buried with it someday, however far off that day now felt in a world that no longer promised anyone very much time at all.

She thought of the passage from Second Timothy her father had quoted at more funerals than she could count, words she had heard so many times growing up that they had long ago lost, for her, any real weight — *I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day.* She understood now, reading it in her mind against the backdrop of everything sitting in the lockbox before her — thirty years of sermons, a decade of recorded messages, a letter written four years in advance against the exact possibility that had now come to pass — that her father had not simply believed that verse. He had built his entire life, methodically, faithfully, around making sure it would be true of him when his own course finally ended.

And it struck her, sitting there, that the course had not actually ended at all. It had simply been passed to her.

She thought of Isaiah forty-six, verse ten — a verse she found later that same week, tucked into the margin of one of her father's sermon notebooks beside a note in his own hand that read simply *for R., when she is ready*: *Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.* Her father had known, decades before any of this happened, precisely how certain he was that it would happen — not because he

possessed some secret knowledge no one else had, but because he had simply believed, without qualification, that the God who had declared the end from the beginning could be trusted to keep every promise He had ever made.

Rebecca gathered the lockbox's contents carefully — the letter, the sermon notes, the DVDs and flash drives — and carried them out of the small office, back through the fellowship hall with its scattered, silent evidence of the Tuesday study that never finished, and into the sanctuary itself, where the front rows still sat waiting in their orderly lines beneath a simple wooden cross her father had installed with his own hands the year Rebecca turned nine.

She walked to the front of that empty sanctuary, set the box down on the front pew, and for the first time in more than three years, Rebecca Whitfield knelt.

VI. The Altar

She did not have eloquent words for what she prayed. She had spent four years of her professional life teaching teenagers the power of careful language, of precisely chosen words, and none of that training was any use to her now, kneeling on a carpet worn thin by three decades of other people's prayers, in a building that held the physical proof of everything she had spent years insisting could not possibly be real.

"I don't know how to start," she said aloud, her voice small in the vast, silent room. "I've been so angry. Not just at you — at everything. At losing Grandma and watching Dad still stand up and preach the next Sunday like it hadn't broken something in him too. At feeling like I had to choose between being honest and being his daughter, like I couldn't have both." She wiped her face with the back of her hand, and kept going, because stopping now felt somehow more unbearable than continuing. "But I read his letter. And I watched his video. And I've been reading his Bible for four days now, and I don't have an argument left. I don't have a clever answer. I was wrong. I was wrong about all of it, and he was right, and I would give anything — *anything* — to tell him that to his face instead of to an empty church."

She thought, kneeling there, of Psalm thirty-four, verse eighteen, a verse she had noticed underlined in her father's Bible just that morning, in the section he'd clearly turned to often: *The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit.* She had always understood that verse, vaguely, as comfort for people in grief. She understood it now, kneeling at the front of her father's church with nothing left in her but honesty, as something closer to an invitation — the promise that the very brokenness she had been carrying for four devastating days was not a barrier standing between her and God, but the exact condition He had always promised to meet her in.

"I believe You," she said finally, the words coming out steadier than she expected, steadier than anything she had said in days. "I believe Jesus died and rose again. I believe my dad was telling the truth his whole life, every Sunday I sat there rolling my eyes at him. I believe You so loved the world — I believe You so loved *me* — that You gave Your Son, so that whosoever believes wouldn't perish. I'm the whosoever, God. I'm asking. Please. I don't want to be left behind twice."

She stayed on her knees for a long time after that, not because she felt she needed to say anything more, but because some part of her — the part that had spent three years building careful, reasonable

arguments against exactly this moment — finally, entirely, had nothing left to argue with. When she finally rose, the sanctuary around her looked exactly the same as it had when she knelt: the same worn carpet, the same simple wooden cross, the same gray, smoke-hazed light filtering through the same tall windows. But Rebecca Whitfield, kneeling down a skeptic and standing up something else entirely, understood that she herself was no longer remotely the same person who had walked through those doors an hour before.

Old things are passed away, she thought, the verse from her father's letter returning to her unbidden. *Behold, all things are become new.*

VII. The Voice on the Screen

Ethan Walker found her there a little after four in the afternoon, having come by the church on a hunch after Rebecca failed to answer at the parsonage — a habit the two of them had fallen into without ever quite discussing it, checking on each other the way people do when grief has made them suddenly, unexpectedly responsible for one another. He had brought with him, at Jack Reynolds's suggestion, an old laptop of Jack's grandfather's, outdated enough that its simple components had somehow survived the pulse, along with a car battery and the small inverter Frank Pelletier had rigged for exactly this kind of purpose.

"Jack said if anybody in this town still has something worth watching on a screen, it's probably sitting in that church office," Ethan said, setting the laptop down carefully on the front pew beside Rebecca. "Thought you might want to see if any of this actually plays before you carry it all home."

It took the better part of twenty minutes to get the old machine running and one of the flash drives readable, but eventually a video window opened, grainy and slightly pixelated, and Caleb Whitfield's face filled the small screen — younger than the version Rebecca remembered from the camcorder recording, this one dated nearly three years earlier, recorded not for the website but, according to the file name, simply archived from a Sunday morning service.

"Turn with me to the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy," her father's recorded voice said, filling the empty sanctuary in a way that made the hair rise on Rebecca's arms, as though he might, impossibly, walk out from behind the pulpit at any moment. *"Verses four through seven. 'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.'"*

He had preached, that Sunday three years ago, on the responsibility of parents to pass their faith down to the next generation — and Rebecca sat in the front pew beside Ethan, listening to her own father unknowingly address, across three years and a resurrection he had not yet experienced, the exact failure that had haunted him every day since her defection from the faith. *"Some of you have children who've wandered,"* his recorded voice said, gentler now, and Rebecca felt Ethan go very still beside her, understanding, without being told, exactly whose face had been in her father's mind when he said it. *"I want to say something to you, and I want you to hear it as a father who understands that particular*

grief better than I'd ever choose to. Deuteronomy doesn't say your job is to make them believe. You can't do that — nobody can, not even God forces a heart to love Him, He only ever invites it. Your job is to keep speaking the truth in season and out of season, to keep loving without condition, and to trust the seed you've planted to a God who is infinitely more patient than you are, and infinitely more able to reach the ones you love than you will ever be yourself."

Rebecca sat with her hands pressed against her mouth, tears running freely down her face for the second time that day, and Ethan reached over without a word and took her free hand in both of his, the two of them sitting together in the empty sanctuary listening to a dead man's voice deliver, with startling precision, the exact comfort his living daughter needed to hear.

"He was talking about me," she said finally, when the recording ended. "Three years ago. He didn't even know I'd hear it someday."

"I don't think that's true," Ethan said quietly. "I think he probably hoped, every single time he preached something like that, that you would hear it someday. He just didn't know it'd take this."

VIII. Sophie's Shoes

Before the light failed entirely, Rebecca walked the four blocks to the small house on Willow Court where Denise Marsh, the church nursery director, lived alone now with a husband deployed overseas with the National Guard and no way, in the current chaos, of even knowing whether her husband was alive to be told what had happened to their daughter.

She found Denise sitting on her own front porch in the gathering dusk, hollow-eyed, a neighbor woman sitting beside her in silent vigil the way Ashwood's women had begun, in these first days, to simply take turns sitting beside one another's grief without needing to be asked. Rebecca held out the small box with Sophie's shoes inside, unable to find any words adequate to the moment, and Denise Marsh took the box with both hands, opened it, and made a sound Rebecca would remember for the rest of her life — not quite a sob, something rawer and older than that, the sound of a mother's body understanding a loss her mind had not yet fully absorbed.

"She loved this Bible study," Denise said finally, when she could speak again, running one thumb slowly over the worn canvas of her daughter's small sneaker. "Begged me every Tuesday to let her come instead of staying home with the sitter. Said Pastor Whitfield let her ask as many questions as she wanted, never once told her she was too little to understand." She looked up at Rebecca, her eyes swollen but suddenly, startlingly clear. "You know what the last thing she told me was, before we left the house that night? She said, 'Mommy, I asked Jesus into my heart at Bible study last week, and Pastor Whitfield said now I'm ready whenever He comes back.' I told her that was wonderful, sweetheart, now finish your supper." Her voice broke entirely on the final words. "She was six years old, Rebecca. Six years old, and she was ready, and I wasn't even paying enough attention to understand what she was actually telling me."

Rebecca sat down on the porch step beside her, and did the only thing she had learned, in four short days, how to do for grief this large: she stayed, and she listened, and when Denise Marsh finally asked, in a small, broken voice, whether Rebecca thought it was true — whether her little girl was really, truly

somewhere safe and whole and no longer afraid — Rebecca found that for the first time in her adult life, she was able to answer without a single trace of doubt.

"I believe it with everything I have," she said. "I didn't four days ago. I do now. Sophie's not lost, Denise. You are the one who's lost her for a little while. She's exactly where your husband would want her to be if he had to choose, and exactly where you're going to see her again."

IX. What She Carried Out

She spent the rest of that Saturday afternoon in the fellowship hall, moving quietly and carefully among the empty clothing and the folding chairs, gathering what she could not bring herself to simply leave scattered on the floor — Sophie Marsh's small shoes, set gently into a box she would eventually give to the girl's grieving father; the open Bibles left behind by people whose owners would never return to claim them, which she stacked carefully on a table by the door, understanding, with a strange and sudden clarity, exactly what she intended to do with them.

There were, by her count, working through the church's membership rolls that evening with the last of the daylight, at least sixty families in Ashwood who had lost someone in the vanishing — parents, children, spouses, whole households in some tragic cases — and Rebecca understood, sitting in her father's church office surrounded by his life's work, that she had just inherited something she had never once expected or wanted: not simply grief, though there was more of that than she yet knew how to carry, but a task. Thirty years of sermon notes. A decade of recorded messages. A letter that had reached across four years and one impossible catastrophe to find her exactly when she needed it most. Her father had spent his entire ministry telling people the truth before it was too late for them to act on it. He was gone now, and could preach no more sermons, record no more messages, write no more letters — but everything he had ever prepared remained, sitting in a lockbox on a church office desk, waiting only for someone willing to carry it out into a grieving, searching town.

"I don't know how to be a pastor, Dad," Rebecca said quietly, locking the church's front doors behind her as the evening settled in gray and smoke-tinged over Church Street. "But I know how to carry a box. I know how to press play on a recording. I know how to read your handwriting better than anyone else alive. I think that might have to be enough for now."

She walked home in the gathering dark with the lockbox held against her chest the same careful way she had once seen her father hold a hymnal, and she did not yet know — could not yet know, on that quiet Saturday evening in the ruin of everything familiar — that within a month, the recordings and sermon notes she carried out of that empty church that day would be playing in living rooms and barns and roadside camps across half the county, that Caleb Whitfield's voice, silent now in body but never in testimony, would go on leading strangers to the same cross his daughter had finally, fully, found her way to — or that the small, unremarkable act of gathering a father's life's work into a cardboard box would turn out to be one of the most consequential decisions Rebecca Whitfield would ever make.

Declaring the end from the beginning, she thought again, letting herself into the dark and quiet parsonage, setting the box down at last on her father's kitchen table where four unlikely friends had

gathered two nights earlier to read by lantern light. *My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.*

Whatever pleasure God intended to accomplish through the ashes of Ashwood, Ohio, Rebecca Whitfield understood, sitting alone at her father's table with his life's work spread out before her in the lantern light, she no longer intended to stand on the outside of it, arguing. She intended, for whatever time she had left in whatever kind of world this was becoming, to help build it.

ASHES OF AMERICA — BOOK ONE AFTER THE VANISHING by Dr. Paul Crawford

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Longest Night

"They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon... For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side, and so builded." — Nehemiah 4:17–18 (KJV)

I. What the Dark Now Held

By the second week after the vanishing, Ashwood had learned a lesson its residents would carry for the rest of their lives, whether they survived the years ahead or did not: that darkness, once electricity is taken away, is not simply the absence of light. It is a presence of its own, with a weight and a texture, and it changes what people are willing to do inside it.

The looting had begun small — a break-in at the pharmacy counter of what remained of Higbee's, a stripped and abandoned gas station on the edge of town, a farm equipment shed relieved overnight of tools and fuel cans by persons no one could identify in the moonless dark. By the second Tuesday, one week to the day since the world had changed twice in a single afternoon, it had grown into something Daniel Brooks could no longer describe to himself as isolated incidents. Three homes on the east side of town had been broken into in a single night, their owners — an elderly couple, a young family with two children, a widow living alone — bound, in two of the three cases, and left frightened but physically unharmed while their pantries and medicine cabinets were stripped bare. A farm on the county line had lost half a dozen chickens and a hog to raiders who left tire tracks suggesting they had somehow gotten an older vehicle running, one of the increasingly rare pre-1980s trucks and tractors that had survived the pulse's reach.

And on that same second Tuesday, in the deepening blue dusk of a summer evening that no longer carried streetlights to soften it, someone broke the back window of Ashwood Regional Medical Center's small satellite pharmacy — the one maintaining what remained of the hospital's dwindling

controlled-substance supply — and made off with enough opioid painkillers and sedatives to leave Sarah Collins standing in the wreckage of the room at midnight, physically shaking with an anger she had not expected herself capable of feeling.

"These aren't recreational users," she told Ethan Walker, when he arrived to survey the scene an hour later, his flashlight beam catching the shattered glass still scattered across the tile floor. "Not most of them, anyway. Whoever did this took everything — the insulin, the antibiotics, the seizure medications, not just the narcotics. This wasn't kids looking for a high, Ethan. This was somebody desperate, or somebody planning to resell what they took to people who are desperate, and either way it means we now have patients in this building who are going to die from conditions that were completely manageable a week ago."

Ethan said nothing for a long moment, running the beam of his flashlight slowly across the ransacked shelves, and Sarah watched something settle over his features that she had come to recognize, in the two weeks she'd known him through the Thursday night gatherings at the parsonage, as the particular stillness he wore when he had already decided something and was simply working out, in silence, how to say it out loud.

"It's not going to stop on its own," he said finally. "I've been telling myself for a week that people just need time to adjust, that once the initial shock wears off, folks will settle back into being who they always were. I don't think that's true anymore, Sarah. I think some people are becoming who they always secretly were, and I think we're out of time to keep hoping otherwise."

He was not exaggerating, and both of them knew it. In the two weeks since the last federal broadcast, Richland County had watched something Daniel Brooks had begun privately calling, in the pages of the notebook he now kept alongside his official town business, "the sorting" — the slow, uneven separation of a community into those who grew steadier and more generous under pressure and those who grew harder, more frightened, more willing to take by force what they could no longer obtain any other way. Ron Higbee, whose grocery had been the first casualty of the initial panic, had reopened a small, closely guarded distribution counter out of his own home three blocks from the ruined store, rationing what little remained of his personal stock to elderly neighbors and young families first, refusing payment from anyone who could not afford it — a quiet, unpublicized act of grace that Lydia would later describe, in her growing archive, as one of the truest sermons preached in Ashwood that entire summer, though Ron himself would have been embarrassed to hear it called that. But for every Ron Higbee, there were others — a family two streets from the hospital who had begun hoarding water in unmarked containers while elderly neighbors went without; a man caught siphoning fuel from a church van parked outside First Community; and now, worst of all, whoever had broken into the hospital's own pharmacy, stealing medicine from people who would die without it.

II. The Briefing

Jack Reynolds had been expecting the call for three days by the time it came. He met Ethan and Daniel Brooks at the high school gymnasium the following morning, along with the core of the volunteer group he had spent two weeks quietly assembling and training in the basic disciplines of organized

watch work — perimeter awareness, communication protocols using a chain of hand-signals and, where the range allowed, a small handful of working walkie-talkies Frank Pelletier had managed to shield from the pulse inside a converted ammunition can, and, most importantly to Jack, the strict rules of engagement he had drilled into every one of them from the very first evening.

There were, by that Wednesday morning, thirty-one volunteers standing in loose formation across the gymnasium floor — farmers, a handful of veterans, two off-duty schoolteachers, a retired steelworker, and, to Jack's considerable and openly stated reluctance, seventeen-year-old Noah Simmons, who had shown up three days earlier and refused, with a stubbornness that reminded Jack uncomfortably of himself at that age, to be turned away.

"You're seventeen," Jack had told him then, the same argument he was prepared to make again this morning if Noah pushed the issue. "I'm not putting a rifle in your hands and sending you out to face down grown men who've already decided the law doesn't apply to them anymore."

"Then don't give me a rifle," Noah had answered, without flinching. "Give me a radio. Let me run messages, watch a corner, do whatever the least dangerous job is. I'm not asking to be a hero, Mr. Reynolds. I just watched my whole family disappear or vanish in the same week and I'm not going to sit at home doing nothing while people who actually did something for this town get hurt protecting it."

Jack had relented, eventually, assigning Noah to a communications post at the edge of the perimeter with strict instructions to run, not fight, if trouble ever found him directly — a compromise that satisfied neither of them completely but that Ethan, watching the exchange, had recognized as exactly the kind of hard, imperfect decision that defined nearly everything about the world they were all now living in.

Jack addressed the full group standing in the gymnasium that Wednesday morning with the same flat, level clarity he had used with his original six volunteers two weeks earlier, though the stakes, everyone in the room understood without being told, had risen considerably since then.

"Starting tonight, we run a full rotating watch," he said. "Four sectors, eight-hour shifts, minimum three people per team so nobody's ever alone out there. Our job is not to hunt anybody down. Our job is to protect what belongs to the people of this town — their homes, their food, their medicine, their lives — and to do it with the absolute minimum force necessary, every single time, because the day this watch starts looking and acting like the very thing it's supposed to be protecting people from is the day this town loses something it may never get back."

He paused, looking out over faces that ranged from grim determination to poorly hidden fear, and allowed himself, for the first time in front of the assembled group, a moment of something closer to honesty than tactics.

"I want to say one more thing, and then we'll get to assignments," he said. "Some of you know I've spent a fair amount of my life around men doing exactly this kind of work in a lot worse places than Richland County, Ohio. I want you to hear this from somebody who's actually lived it: the hardest part of what we're about to start doing isn't the fear. It's what happens afterward, in your own head, if it ever comes down to using force against another human being — even a man who's trying to hurt somebody you love. That cost is real, and I'm not going to lie to any of you about it. Old Walt Henderson quoted

me a verse a couple weeks back I haven't been able to shake since — Ecclesiastes, chapter three. *To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven... a time to kill, and a time to heal.* I used to think that verse was just poetry. I've come to believe it might be the most honest thing anybody's ever written about what we're about to ask each other to do. There is a time for this. I believe that. I also believe every one of us needs to pray, tonight, that the time never actually comes — and if it does, that we carry it afterward the way it deserves to be carried, with grief, not pride."

III. The Council Meets

Before the watch rotation began that Wednesday evening, Daniel Brooks called a smaller, quieter meeting in his own office — Ethan, Jack, Sarah, and, at Jack's specific request, Rebecca Whitfield, whose father's decades of counsel Jack had come, in these strange weeks, to trust in a way he could not entirely explain even to himself.

"I need this watch operating under something more than good intentions," Brooks said, spreading a single handwritten sheet across his desk. "If we're going to authorize armed men to use force in defense of this town, I want it written down — what's allowed, what isn't, who answers to whom when something goes wrong. I will not have this town remembered, five years from now, as the place where the watch became indistinguishable from the raiders it was supposed to be stopping."

They spent nearly two hours drafting it together, line by careful line — force only in defense of life or essential resources, never in pursuit of a fleeing suspect beyond the immediate threat, every incident reported and reviewed within twenty-four hours, no volunteer permitted to serve who could not demonstrate, in Jack's own blunt words, "the discipline to hold fire when holding fire is the harder and better choice." Rebecca, listening more than speaking through most of the discussion, finally offered the one addition that would end up, framed and hung inside the gymnasium that served as the watch's headquarters, becoming something closer to the group's unofficial creed.

"My father used to say authority without conscience becomes tyranny, and conscience without authority becomes chaos," she said. "I think whatever you're building here needs both, or it isn't going to survive its own success. Romans thirteen says the one who bears the sword is a minister of God for good — but the very next chapter, the very next breath practically, says to owe no man anything but to love one another. I think this town needs to hear both halves of that, or it's going to forget, somewhere down the road, which one it was actually protecting."

Brooks had the two verses printed, by hand, at the bottom of the finished document, and Jack read them aloud to every new volunteer who joined the watch in the weeks that followed, a small ritual that outlasted, in the end, nearly everything else about that difficult first month.

IV. Ashwood Regional, After Hours

While Jack briefed his volunteers, Sarah Collins spent the day doing triage of an entirely different kind — walking her dwindling pharmacy shelves with Dana Pruitt, making the kind of decisions no medical school had ever prepared her to make: which patients, among a town of eighteen thousand people,

would receive the hospital's remaining stock of insulin, of antibiotics, of the seizure medication a nine-year-old boy named Tyler Osei needed daily to keep from convulsing.

"We have eleven days of insulin left, at current rationed doses, for the fourteen known diabetic patients we're currently tracking in this town," Sarah told Daniel Brooks that evening, when he stopped by the hospital for the daily briefing that had become, in the last two weeks, as regular a fixture of his schedule as council meetings once had been. "After that, unless we find more, or unless somebody figures out how to produce it locally, which I genuinely do not know how to do — after that, we are going to watch people we know by name go into diabetic comas in front of us, and there is nothing I will be able to do to stop it."

Brooks absorbed this the way he had learned, over two exhausting weeks, to absorb every impossible piece of information handed to him — with a stillness that had less to do with calm than with simple exhaustion, the particular numbness of a man who had run out of new reactions to catastrophe and was operating now on pure, grinding will alone.

"The pharmacy break-in didn't help," he said.

"No," Sarah agreed. "It did not."

She thought, walking the darkened hallways of the hospital later that night on her rounds, of a verse Rebecca had shared with the small Thursday night group the week before, from the book of Philippians — *My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus* — and found herself wrestling with it in a way she would not have expected, two weeks earlier, to be capable of wrestling with a Bible verse at all. She was not yet ready to call herself a believer, not fully, not in the way Rebecca and Noah and, increasingly, Ethan seemed to have crossed over into something settled and certain. But she found, walking those dark halls with a flashlight and a clipboard, that she no longer dismissed the verse as wishful thinking either. She simply held it, the way she had learned to hold so many uncertain things in these last two weeks, without yet knowing what to do with the holding.

V. Midnight at the Boyd Farm

The trouble Jack had been bracing for arrived four nights into the new watch rotation, a little after one in the morning, at the edge of Curtis Boyd's two-hundred-acre farm on the county's western border — the largest single working farm remaining in the immediate area, and, as Jack had privately predicted from the very first day the food council formed, an obvious and increasingly tempting target for anyone desperate enough to stop weighing the risk.

Ethan was on that shift, paired with Jack himself and a steady, quiet young farmhand named Deacon Ellis, moving along the tree line that bordered Boyd's northern field when the first sound reached them — not gunfire, not yet, but the low rumble of an engine, one of the rare surviving pre-pulse vehicles, moving without headlights along the access road that ran behind the Boyd family's grain silos.

"Three men, at least," Jack said quietly, dropping to a crouch and signaling the others down with him, his voice gone flat and clipped in a way Ethan had not heard from him before, the sound, Ethan

understood immediately, of eleven years of training reasserting itself over the ordinary, careful farmer Jack Reynolds had otherwise become. "Truck's parked behind the second silo. They're going for the grain, or the diesel stores, maybe both."

They approached carefully, using the cover Jack had scouted on his very first walk of this exact perimeter two weeks earlier, and found, in the faint moonlight filtering through the smoke haze that had never fully cleared since the attack, three men working quickly at the padlock on Curtis Boyd's fuel shed — men Ethan did not recognize, hard-looking, one of them carrying a rifle slung across his back with the casual readiness of someone who had used it before and expected to use it again.

"Ashwood Watch," Ethan called out, his old police training taking over, his voice carrying clear and level across the dark yard. "Step away from the shed. Hands where we can see them."

What happened in the next ninety seconds would be argued over, in one form or another, for months afterward, by everyone who heard the account secondhand — whether the man with the rifle had genuinely reached for it in panic, or in aggression, or simply out of the same blind, animal instinct that had driven so much of the chaos across the county these last two weeks. What was not in dispute was that the rifle came up, that Jack's voice cut through the dark with a final, sharp command to drop it, and that when the man did not comply fast enough, Jack fired first — a single shot, disciplined and precise even in the chaos of the moment, striking the man's shoulder rather than anything more lethal, a restraint that Ethan would understand only later, replaying the scene in his mind, had represented the very outer edge of what split-second control a human being could exercise under that kind of pressure.

The wounded man went down, screaming. His two companions fled into the darkness, abandoning the truck, and within moments Deacon Ellis was radioing for help while Jack, moving without hesitation, closed the distance to the fallen man and began, with the same steady hands that had once packed wounds shut on far deadlier battlefields, applying pressure to a shoulder that was bleeding badly but was not, Jack's practiced assessment told him almost immediately, going to be fatal if help arrived quickly.

"Why?" Ethan asked, kneeling beside Jack in the dirt, watching him work with a competence that seemed almost otherworldly given the circumstances. "You could have let him bleed. Nobody would have blamed you."

"I would have blamed me," Jack said, not looking up, his hands never once faltering on the wound. "There's a difference between stopping a threat and executing a man who's already stopped being one. I've spent a long time learning where that line sits, Ethan. I'm not about to forget it the first hard night this town throws at me."

VI. What Noah Heard on the Radio

A quarter mile away, at his assigned communications post beside an old feed store that had become, in the two weeks since the watch began, an informal staging point for the eastern half of the rotation, Noah Simmons sat gripping his radio with both hands, listening to the terse, controlled exchange of voices reporting shots fired, one man down, medical assistance required, and felt his whole body go cold with a fear more total than anything he had experienced since the night his parents disappeared.

He did the only thing his post assignment allowed him to do, and did it as fast as his legs would carry him — running the half mile to Ashwood Regional to alert Sarah Collins directly, since the hospital's own radio contact had gone briefly, maddeningly silent in the confusion, and every minute mattered now in a way Noah understood with a clarity that made his lungs burn worse than the running itself.

He found Sarah already moving, already assembling a trauma kit, Dana Pruitt close behind her, and delivered his message in gasping, half-coherent bursts between breaths — location, one man down, gunshot wound to the shoulder, Jack Reynolds actively controlling the bleeding.

"You did exactly right," Sarah told him, gripping his shoulder for one steadying second before she was moving again, out toward the hospital's one remaining working vehicle, an old diesel ambulance that had, mercifully, survived the pulse's reach due to its age and its simpler mechanical systems. "Noah. You did exactly right."

He stood alone in the hospital's ambulance bay after she left, his heart still hammering, and found himself, without quite deciding to, praying — not the halting, uncertain prayers of two weeks earlier, but something steadier now, something that had grown, quietly, alongside every Thursday night spent at the parsonage table. *Lord, keep them safe. Whatever's happening out there right now, keep Mr. Reynolds and Lieutenant Walker safe, and please, God, don't let anybody die tonight who doesn't have to.*

He thought, standing there in the dark ambulance bay, of a verse Rebecca had shared just that week from the ninety-first Psalm, one her father had apparently quoted often in his hospital visits, according to the notes she'd found: *He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler. Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day.* Noah had wondered, hearing it read aloud around the lantern-lit kitchen table, whether it was the kind of promise that actually held up against real gunfire in a real dark field, or whether it was simply a comfort for people who had never had to test it. Standing in the ambulance bay at one-thirty in the morning, waiting for news, he found himself hoping, with an intensity that surprised him, that it was the former.

VII. Aftermath

The wounded man — his name, they would learn later, was Curtis Danvers, a thirty-four-year-old former factory worker from a town twenty miles east whose own community had, by his own later account, fully collapsed into the kind of lawlessness Ashwood was fighting desperately to prevent — survived the night in Ashwood Regional's small surgical recovery ward, guarded by two of Ethan's remaining officers, his shoulder stitched and stabilized by Sarah Collins with a competence that did not waver even though her hands, she admitted to Dana afterward, had been shaking the entire time she worked.

Jack Reynolds did not sleep that night, or for most of the following two. He sat on his own front porch in the gray predawn light after the incident, his hands finally still now that the adrenaline had drained fully away, and found himself, for the first time in years, unable to hold back the memory he had spent a decade carefully containing — the village whose name he still would not say aloud, the two men

under his command who had not come home, the particular, specific weight of having pulled a trigger and changed, forever, the shape of another human being's life.

Walt Henderson found him there a little after sunrise, having heard the news the way all news now traveled through Ashwood, neighbor to neighbor, and sat down beside him on the porch step without a word for a long while, the two of them simply watching the smoke-hazed sun climb over the eastern fields.

"You did what you had to do," Walt said finally. "And you did it as clean as it could have been done. That man's alive because of the mercy in your aim, Jack, not despite it."

"Doesn't feel like mercy," Jack said quietly. "Feels like I brought exactly what I spent eleven years trying to leave behind right back to my own hometown."

Walt was quiet for a moment, and when he spoke again, his voice carried the particular gentleness of a man who had buried a wife and outlived most of his own generation and had, somewhere along that long road, made a kind of peace Jack was still years away from finding for himself.

"You ever read Romans thirteen?" Walt asked. "Your pastor — well, Rebecca's father, I should say now, God rest him — preached on it more than once. Says the governing authority 'beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.' There's no government left standing over this county anymore, Jack, not one that's coming to do that job for us. That doesn't mean the job disappeared. It means it fell to whoever's left willing to carry it, and carry it rightly — with restraint, with mercy, the way you carried it last night. That's not the same thing as bringing violence home. That's holding a line so violence doesn't get to write the whole rest of this town's story."

Jack didn't answer right away. He sat with the words the same way he had sat with Walt's verse about the rock and the fortress two weeks earlier, turning them over, testing them, unable, even now, to find quite the flaw in them he had been half hoping to find.

"I don't know if I believe all of it yet," he said finally. "The way you believe it. The way Rebecca does now, and Ethan's getting there too, near as I can tell."

"Nobody's asking you to arrive anywhere tonight, son," Walt said, and there was something almost like a smile in his weathered old voice. "Just keep walking toward it. That's all any of us ever managed to do."

VIII. What the Night Cost, and What It Bought

By the following evening, word of the confrontation at the Boyd farm had traveled through every corner of Ashwood and half the surrounding county — and its effect, Daniel Brooks noted with a grim, weary satisfaction he took no real pleasure in, was almost immediate. The pace of break-ins slowed within days, not because desperation had lessened anywhere in Richland County, but because word had spread, accurately, that Ashwood was no longer an easy target — that the town had organized itself, armed itself with discipline rather than mere fear, and would meet violence with a controlled and costly response rather than the chaos and confusion that had made the first two weeks so dangerous.

It was not a victory anyone in that working group was inclined to celebrate. Sarah Collins, checking on Curtis Danvers in his hospital bed two days later, found him weeping quietly, telling her in halting fragments about the town he'd come from, the wife and two children he had left behind there three days earlier because he could no longer feed them and could not bear to watch them starve in front of him — a confession that left Sarah standing in the doorway of his room for a long time afterward, unable to fully separate her anger at what he had done from her grief at what had driven him to do it.

"He's not a monster," she told Rebecca that Thursday night, the small group gathered once more around the parsonage kitchen table, their number quietly grown now by two — Jack Reynolds, still uncertain but no longer entirely resistant, and Dana Pruitt, who had begun attending the week after her uncle Harold's disappearance and had not missed a Thursday since. "He's a father who ran out of every option he had left. I keep thinking about that verse from Ecclesiastes Jack quoted the volunteers before all this happened. A time to kill, a time to heal. I think we're going to be living inside both of those, sometimes in the very same night, for longer than any of us want to admit."

Rebecca nodded slowly, turning her father's Bible in her hands, and found, without needing to search for it, the passage she had been thinking of all evening — words from the fifth chapter of Matthew that her father had preached on more times than she could count, words that felt, in the aftermath of a night that had cost Ashwood its innocence in one more small, irreversible way, both harder and truer than they ever had before.

"Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God." She read it aloud into the quiet kitchen, the lantern flame steady now on the table between them. "I used to think that verse meant avoiding conflict altogether. I don't think that anymore. I think making peace, real peace, sometimes costs the peacemaker more than avoiding the fight ever would have. I think that's exactly what it cost Jack last night, and what it's still costing him right now, and I don't think we should let him carry that alone."

They prayed together that night, the small group grown now to six, for Jack Reynolds and for Curtis Danvers both, for the family Danvers had left behind in a town without hope, for Ashwood itself as it stumbled forward one impossibly hard night at a time — and Ethan Walker, sitting at the same table where he had first opened his wife's Bible three weeks earlier, found himself praying aloud for the first time in his adult life, haltingly, imperfectly, and entirely without shame.

Outside, the smoke haze that had never fully lifted since the attack on Cleveland hung low over a town that had survived its longest night yet — not unbroken, not unchanged, but standing, together, one more day than it might otherwise have stood alone.

IX. Lydia's Account

Lydia Hayes spent the following two days doing what she had come, by then, to think of as the truest form of the work she had always believed journalism was supposed to be — not chasing the loudest version of a story, but sitting with the people inside it long enough to record something closer to the whole of it. She interviewed Jack, who answered her questions with the same spare honesty he brought to everything, offering no defense of what he'd done beyond the simple, unadorned fact that a man with

a rifle had refused an order to lower it. She interviewed Ethan, who spoke more about Noah's composure under pressure than about his own. She interviewed Curtis Danvers himself, propped up in his hospital bed with his shoulder bandaged, and found herself, against every instinct her profession had trained into her, weeping quietly at her own kitchen table that night transcribing his account of the wife and children he'd left behind in a town with nothing left to offer them.

She published all three accounts side by side in that week's edition of the Gazette, without editorial comment, under a single headline she had agonized over longer than any headline of her career: THE FIRST NIGHT WE FOUGHT BACK — AND WHAT IT COST EVERYONE INVOLVED. She closed the piece, as she had begun closing nearly everything she wrote now, with a verse — this one from the book of Micah, chapter six, that Rebecca had pointed her toward earlier that week when Lydia confessed she didn't know how to write about violence without either excusing it or condemning the men forced to carry it out. *He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?*

"That's the whole tension of this entire war we're fighting now, Lydia," Rebecca had told her, sitting across the parsonage table with her father's Bible open between them. "Justice and mercy aren't opposites. They're supposed to walk together, arm in arm, the way Jack walked Curtis Danvers to that ambulance instead of leaving him in the dirt. I think that's the only kind of town worth surviving to become — one that never forgets it's supposed to hold both hands at once, even when holding both is the hardest possible thing to do."

Lydia filed the piece away in the growing archive she kept in a fireproof box beneath her desk — the same box that would, years later, form the backbone of the only complete written history anyone ever produced of Ashwood's first terrible summer — and allowed herself, for the first time in nearly three exhausting weeks, a single quiet evening of something that felt, however faintly, like hope.

ASHES OF AMERICA — BOOK ONE AFTER THE VANISHING by Dr. Paul Crawford

CHAPTER EIGHT

Searching for Answers

"And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity... Men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth... And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh." — Luke 21:25–28 (KJV)

I. The Case File

Sarah Collins had built her entire professional life on a single, disciplined habit: when she did not understand something, she did not guess. She researched. She gathered every available data point,

arranged them without prejudice, and let the evidence lead her to a conclusion rather than the other way around. It was the habit that had carried her through medical school, through residency, through eight years of training her mind to distrust intuition and trust only what could be demonstrated, measured, and repeated.

It was that same habit, three weeks after the vanishing, that finally led Sarah Collins to sit down at her kitchen table with a legal pad, a stack of Caleb Whitfield's recorded sermons that Rebecca had lent her on an old flash drive, and the borrowed laptop Jack Reynolds's grandfather had unknowingly saved from the pulse — and to begin, with the same rigor she would have applied to any unexplained clinical presentation, an actual, structured investigation into the claims her father, her patients, and increasingly her own eyes had been quietly building toward for three exhausting weeks.

She titled the legal pad, only half joking with herself as she wrote it, CASE FILE: THE VANISHING — DIFFERENTIAL DIAGNOSIS.

She had, by that point, already ruled out — carefully, deliberately, the way she would rule out competing diagnoses for an unexplained set of symptoms — nearly every alternative explanation she could construct. Mass hysteria did not explain empty clothing left in the precise shape of a standing or sitting body, nor did it explain the near-simultaneous global scope of an event that had struck coordinated moments apart across every time zone on earth. A secret government weapon did not explain why the disappearances had shown no discernible pattern of military value, striking children and the elderly and the medically fragile as readily as anyone strategically useful, nor why it had occurred in the identical instant as a documented, verifiable religious and cultural pattern going back millennia. She had spent an entire evening, two weeks earlier, trying to construct a plausible scientific mechanism — some kind of targeted quantum event, some unknown radiation effect selectively lethal to a specific genetic marker — and had abandoned the effort not because it was impossible to imagine, but because every version of it required inventing more unproven assumptions than the explanation she was trying so hard to avoid.

That evening, with the last of the daylight fading through her kitchen window, Sarah pressed play on the first of Caleb Whitfield's sermons and began, for the first time in her adult life, to treat the Bible as a document worth investigating on its own terms rather than dismissing on principle.

II. What the Prophets Said

The recording Rebecca had specifically flagged for her — labeled, in Caleb Whitfield's careful handwriting on the drive's paper sleeve, "Signs of the Times, Parts 1–4" — had been preached, according to the file's timestamp, just over a year before the vanishing, and Sarah found herself, within the first ten minutes, taking notes with the same focused urgency she once reserved for grand rounds.

"Turn with me to Matthew twenty-four," her father's recorded voice said — she had begun to think of him that way, in these late-night sessions, almost as if he were her father too, a voice speaking directly and specifically into the exact confusion she now occupied. *"The disciples come to Jesus privately and ask Him two things: when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming and of the end of the age? And Jesus doesn't waste a single word getting to the point. Verse six: 'And ye shall hear*

of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places. All these are the beginning of sorrows.'"

Sarah wrote the reference down, and beside it, in the disciplined shorthand of a physician building a differential, a single word: *baseline.* Wars, rumors of war, famine, disease, earthquake — these were, she noted honestly, unfortunately common features of nearly every era of recorded human history, and she was too careful a researcher to credit a prophecy with predicting conditions that had existed, in some form, more or less continuously since the beginning of civilization. She kept listening, watching for something more specific, more falsifiable — the kind of distinguishing symptom that separated one diagnosis definitively from another.

She found it, or began to find it, in the second sermon in the series, where her father's recorded voice turned from Matthew to a passage in First Thessalonians that Sarah recognized immediately, with a lurch in her stomach, from the small worn New Testament of Marcus Chen's she now kept on her nightstand.

"Paul writes to the church at Thessalonica something extraordinary," the recording continued. *"First Thessalonians four, verses sixteen and seventeen: 'For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.' Folks, this is not a metaphor. This is not a poetic way of describing something that happens gradually, or symbolically, over the course of history. Paul is describing a specific, instantaneous, physical event — a removal, a catching away, of every true believer on earth, living and dead, in a single moment.'"*

Sarah set her pen down and sat very still for a long moment, staring at the frozen video frame of a man who had, at the exact moment she now understood he'd been describing, vanished from a hospital room holding an old woman's hand. She thought of First Corinthians fifteen, a passage her father cited next, which she found, with trembling fingers, in Marcus Chen's small Testament and read for herself rather than simply listening to it read: *"Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed."*

In a moment. In the twinkling of an eye. Sarah had watched Marcus Chen's scrubs collapse onto an empty operating room floor in less time than it took her own heart to complete a single beat. She had spent three weeks searching for a physical mechanism capable of producing that specific, instantaneous effect, and here, in a document nearly two thousand years old, was a description that matched what she had personally witnessed with a precision that made every alternative hypothesis she had constructed feel, for the first time, genuinely, uncomfortably inadequate.

III. Mrs. Antonelli

The investigation might have stalled there, a careful catalog of prophecy and correspondence Sarah could still, in her most stubborn moments, have filed away as remarkable coincidence rather than

confirmed conclusion, had it not been for a patient named Josephine Antonelli, eighty-six years old, admitted to Ashwood Regional two days later in the final stages of the congestive heart failure she had been quietly managing, with dwindling medication and diminishing hope, for the better part of a year.

Sarah had cared for Mrs. Antonelli on and off for fourteen months, long enough to know her as more than a chart number — a retired schoolteacher, widowed young, sharp-tongued and warm in the particular combination Sarah had always found herself drawn to in her older patients. She was dying now, plainly and without much possibility of intervention; the medications that might once have bought her more time were gone, spent on patients with better odds, in the hard, unsentimental calculus the hospital's rationing plan now demanded of everyone on staff.

Sarah sat with her the evening before she died, past the end of her shift, for reasons she could not have fully explained even to herself except that some part of her, deep in the middle of her four-night investigation, needed to see for herself how a person actually approached the last hours of a life.

"You're not frightened," Sarah said, watching the old woman's calm, unhurried breathing, itself labored but her face entirely at peace. "I've sat with a lot of dying patients, Mrs. Antonelli. Most people are frightened, even when they say they aren't."

"I was frightened for about sixty years," Josephine Antonelli said, her voice thin but steady. "Ever since I was old enough to understand what death actually was. And then three weeks ago I watched my grandson vanish out of my own arms while we were sitting on my porch swing, gone in an instant, no explanation the doctors or the police or anybody else could ever give me — and do you know, dear, it was the single most terrifying and the single most reassuring thing that has ever happened to me in my whole life. Terrifying, because it meant everything I'd half believed and mostly ignored my entire life was suddenly, undeniably true. Reassuring, because it meant I finally knew, for certain, exactly where he'd gone, and exactly what was waiting on the other side of whatever's about to happen to me tonight."

"How can you be certain?" Sarah asked, and meant it as a real question, not the gentle, professional deflection she usually offered dying patients who spoke this way.

"Because John eleven, twenty-five and twenty-six," Mrs. Antonelli said, without hesitation, the reference coming to her as easily as her own name. "Jesus said it Himself, to Martha, standing outside her brother Lazarus's tomb. 'I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.' I asked Him into my life sixty-one years ago, dear, at a little Methodist camp meeting I only went to because a boy I liked was going. I've had sixty-one years to test whether that promise was real. I'm about to find out for certain tonight, and I am not the least bit sorry about it."

She died a little after two in the morning, peacefully, Sarah at her bedside long past any professional obligation required, and Sarah walked home in the gray predawn light with a single fact sitting in her chest that no textbook, no residency, no decade of clinical training had ever prepared her to properly weigh: that in fourteen months of caring for dying patients, she had watched more fear in the eyes of the young and healthy contemplating mortality in the abstract than she had ever once seen in Josephine Antonelli's calm, unhurried final hours — and that the difference, as far as Sarah's careful clinical mind

could determine, had nothing to do with medication, and everything to do with a certainty Sarah herself did not yet possess.

IV. Cross-Referencing the Evidence

She worked for three more nights, methodically, the way she would have worked through any complex differential — cross-referencing, checking for internal consistency, testing the document's claims against what she had personally observed rather than simply accepting them on faith. It was, she would later tell Rebecca, the strangest research project of her entire career, and also, without question, the most consequential.

She found, in Second Timothy chapter three, a passage her father had preached with particular emphasis, a list of characteristics the apostle Paul predicted would define what he called "the last days" — and Sarah read it now not as ancient moralizing but as something closer to a clinical description, checking each symptom against the world she had watched deteriorate around her in three short weeks. *"This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers... Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God."* She thought of the man who had grabbed her wrist over a box of insulin at Higbee's. She thought of the raiders at the Boyd farm, of the family hoarding water while elderly neighbors went without. She had, until three weeks ago, understood human selfishness under pressure as an unremarkable feature of evolutionary psychology, nothing more. She found herself now unable to entirely dismiss the possibility that she was watching something the ancient text had specifically, deliberately anticipated.

She found Daniel's prophecy of a coming world ruler who would arise out of chaos, promising peace and unity to a fractured, desperate world — a passage her father had apparently preached only rarely, with a note in the margin of his sermon file that read simply, *save this one for when the time is closer.* The recording, when she finally located it among the older files on the drive, dealt with Daniel chapter nine, a prophecy concerning what her father called "the seventy weeks" — a precise, mathematically specific timeline concerning the nation of Israel that Sarah, with her physician's instinct for exact figures, found herself checking and rechecking against the historical dates her father cited, unable to locate the error in his math no matter how many times she reworked it on her legal pad. *"Daniel was told that after a specific, numbered period,"* her father's recorded voice explained, *"the Messiah would be cut off, not for Himself — crucified, in other words, for the sins of others — and that afterward, a coming prince would eventually rise and make a covenant with many for one final seven-year period, only to break that covenant partway through and set up what the prophet calls 'the abomination of desolation.' We are not there yet, church. I want to be careful and honest with you about that. But I believe, given everything else Scripture tells us must happen first, that the chaos following the Rapture of the church is precisely the kind of soil in which a figure like that finally, fully rises — a man who looks, at first, like exactly the leader a shattered, terrified world has been praying for."*

Sarah set the recording aside for the moment, unable, even with her newly opened mind, to fully process the implications of a chapter that felt less like ancient history and more, with each passing

week of the actual chaos consuming her own country, like a forecast she was currently living inside. She thought of the emergency broadcast Frank Pelletier had captured weeks earlier, the exhausted, defeated voice of a minor federal official admitting that no one remained who could credibly claim command of the nation — and wondered, for the first time, with a chill that had nothing to do with the cool basement air of Frank's radio room, how long it might actually be before someone stepped forward to fill a vacuum that enormous, and how many desperate, frightened people might greet that someone, when he finally came, as nothing less than salvation.

And she found, on the fourth night, in the final sermon of her father's series, the verse that finally, completely dismantled the last of her resistance — not a verse of prophecy at all, but a simple, direct invitation, delivered in her father's warm, unhurried voice with an urgency Sarah now understood he must have felt every single time he preached it, never once knowing which listener, on which particular Sunday, might be hearing it for the very last time before the door closed.

"Revelation, chapter three, verse twenty," he said. *"Jesus Himself speaking, to a church that had grown lukewarm, that had stopped truly seeking Him even while going through all the religious motions. 'Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.' Friends, He is not forcing His way in. He never has. He stands at the door of every single heart in this room tonight, knocking, patiently, and He will not knock forever — but for as long as He does knock, the door remains yours, and only yours, to open."*

Sarah Collins sat alone at her kitchen table a little after two in the morning, twenty-nine years old, a physician who had spent her entire adult life trusting nothing she could not measure, and found that for the first time in longer than she could remember, she was afraid — not of a diagnosis, not of a patient she couldn't save, but of a door she had just spent four nights of careful, rigorous investigation proving, to her own exacting satisfaction, was real.

V. What Marcus Chen Left Behind

She did not open the door that night. She was too careful, too methodical, to make a decision of that magnitude on exhaustion and adrenaline alone — and so she did the one further thing her scientific training had always taught her to do before finalizing any significant conclusion: she sought out a second opinion, a witness whose testimony she trusted completely and had simply, in her grief, never fully allowed herself to examine.

She found Dana Pruitt on the hospital's back loading dock the following evening, taking one of the brief breaks the exhausting new rhythm of short-staffed medicine now demanded of both of them, and asked her, without preamble, the question that had been building in her for three sleepless nights.

"Tell me honestly," Sarah said. "Not what you think I want to hear. What actually happened with your uncle Harold, at the very end. Everything you know."

Dana was quiet for a moment, studying Sarah's face in the fading evening light, and then, slowly, told her — the hospice volunteer's account of Harold Pruitt's private, unwitnessed prayer at two in the morning, three days before the vanishing; the small, worn Gideon's Bible the volunteer had left on his tray table, its pages, Dana had since discovered going through his things, marked and re-marked in his

own unsteady hand in his final days, verses underlined that a man who had never once in seventy-nine years shown any interest in Scripture had apparently, in the quiet loneliness of a hospital bed, finally allowed himself to actually read.

"He wrote something in the front cover," Dana said, her voice unsteady. "I found it after. Just a date, and one line: 'Better late than never, Lord. Thank You for not giving up on an old fool.'" She wiped her eyes with the back of one hand. "He was gone three days later, Sarah. Along with a surgeon in the middle of removing his gallbladder, in the exact same half-second, on an operating table where medically speaking there is absolutely no mechanism on this earth that could account for what happened to either one of them."

Sarah thought of Marcus Chen's small worn Testament, sitting on her nightstand, its pages soft from years of daily handling, and understood, with a clarity that felt less like a new realization and more like a door finally, fully swinging open on hinges that had been quietly loosening for three weeks, that she was no longer asking herself whether the evidence supported what her father — she used the word again, deliberately now, in her own mind — had preached. She was only asking herself, standing on a loading dock in the fading evening light with a colleague who had just handed her, without meaning to, the final piece of a case file she had been building since the moment Marcus Chen's scrubs hit an empty operating room floor, whether she was finally ready to act on a conclusion she had already, in every honest corner of her rational mind, reached.

VI. The Door

She went to the parsonage that same night, arriving unannounced a little after nine, and found Rebecca in the kitchen exactly where she had come to expect her, surrounded by her father's sermon notes, the small lantern casting its familiar warm light across the table.

"I need to talk to you," Sarah said, standing in the doorway, "about the thing I've been too proud to admit for three weeks."

Rebecca did not ask what she meant. She simply pulled out the chair across from her own, the same chair Ethan had sat in the first night this small circle had gathered, and waited, the way Sarah had come to understand was one of Rebecca's quiet gifts — an ability to hold space for another person's slow, difficult arrival without ever once rushing them toward it.

Sarah talked for nearly an hour, laying out, point by point, the entire case file she had built across four sleepless nights — the physical impossibility of the disappearance mechanism under any framework she could construct, the precise correspondence between First Corinthians fifteen and what she had personally witnessed on an operating table, the pattern of moral and societal collapse matching, with unsettling accuracy, the very passage in Second Timothy her father had preached over a year before any of it began, Harold Pruitt's deathbed prayer answered in the most literal, undeniable way a prayer had ever been answered in Sarah Collins's professional experience.

"I've spent my entire career believing that everything has a physical explanation," she said finally, her voice unsteady in a way she rarely allowed it to be, even after the hardest shifts of her career. "I still

believe that, actually. I think that's the strange part, Rebecca. I don't think I'm abandoning evidence tonight. I think I'm finally following it somewhere I spent years refusing to let it lead."

"So what does the evidence tell you?" Rebecca asked gently.

Sarah was quiet for a long moment, and when she finally answered, her voice had steadied into something that sounded, to her own surprise, almost like relief.

"That He's real," she said. "That my father — that Pastor Whitfield — was telling the truth his entire life, about all of it. And that I've been standing outside a door I've had every reasonable, evidence-based cause to open for three solid weeks, and the only thing actually stopping me was pride."

Rebecca opened her father's Bible to a page she had marked days earlier, anticipating, in some quiet way, exactly this conversation. "Acts, chapter two, verse twenty-one," she said. "Peter, preaching to a crowd that had just watched something they didn't understand either. 'And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'" She slid the Bible gently across the table. "You don't need a longer case file, Sarah. You've already built one strong enough. The only thing left is to actually call."

Sarah Collins, twenty-nine years old, a physician who had never once in her adult life prayed a word she meant, closed her eyes at her friend's kitchen table and, in halting, unpolished, entirely sincere language that would have satisfied no committee reviewing a clinical protocol and satisfied, she would later say, the only reviewer that had ever actually mattered, called.

"God," she said, "I've spent my whole life trusting only what I could prove. I think You just let me prove this the only way I'd ever actually accept it. I believe Jesus died and rose again. I believe He's coming back, the way You said He would, and I believe I nearly missed it because I was too certain of my own certainty to look honestly at what was right in front of me the whole time. I'm asking You to save me. I don't have anything else to offer You except that I finally, actually believe it."

When she opened her eyes, Rebecca was crying, and reached across the table to take both of Sarah's hands in her own, and for a long moment neither of them said anything at all, because nothing more needed saying.

VII. Word Spreads

Sarah's conversion, quiet and private as it had been at Rebecca's kitchen table, did not stay quiet for long — not because either woman sought to broadcast it, but because Ashwood, in the strange, close, all-consuming intimacy of a town cut off from the rest of the world, had become the kind of place where every genuine change in a person's life traveled from house to house within days, the way the town's earlier panics and rumors once had, except that this particular news, unlike so much else that had traveled through Ashwood's grief-stricken grapevine over the previous three weeks, seemed, wherever it landed, to plant something rather than merely alarm.

Dana Pruitt was next, coming to faith less than a week later in a conversation with Sarah herself, in the same hospital break room where she had first told Sarah about her uncle Harold's deathbed prayer — a conversation that ended, this time, with Dana kneeling on the break room's worn linoleum floor, Sarah's

hand on her shoulder, praying the same simple, unpolished prayer that Sarah herself had prayed only days before.

Curtis Boyd, the farmer whose fields had nearly cost Jack Reynolds and Curtis Danvers both their lives, came to the parsonage the following Thursday night, having heard, through his wife, that something was happening at Pastor Whitfield's old kitchen table that he needed to see for himself — and left three hours later having listened to two full recorded sermons and having prayed, at his own insistence, before anyone else in the room had even finished suggesting it might be time.

Denise Marsh came the week after that, the small shoes Rebecca had returned to her still sitting, Rebecca would learn, on the nightstand beside her bed every night since — not as a shrine to grief, Denise told her, but as a promise she had finally decided to believe in fully rather than merely hope was true. She wept through most of the first hour, and prayed through the last twenty minutes of it, and left, she said, feeling for the first time in a month that she was walking toward her daughter again instead of only away from her.

Even Ron Higbee, whose grocery had been the first casualty of the town's initial panic and who had spent a month quietly rationing what remained of his personal stock to elderly neighbors without ever once mentioning it to anyone, showed up one Thursday evening with his wife, Doreen, sitting near the back of the growing circle without saying much of anything at all — until, near the end of the evening, he asked, in a voice rough with an emotion he plainly was not accustomed to displaying in front of others, whether it was really true that a man could be saved even after a whole life spent going to church out of habit rather than conviction. Rebecca answered him with her father's own words, copied so many times into the sermon notes spread across the table that she had them memorized without meaning to: *it was never about how long you'd been going. It was only ever about whether you'd finally, actually come.* Ron Higbee prayed that night with the same careful, deliberate honesty he had once used to balance his store's books by hand, and left, Doreen told Rebecca later, a different man than the one who had walked in.

By the fourth week after the vanishing, the small Thursday night gathering that had begun with four grieving, searching friends around a lantern-lit kitchen table had grown too large for the parsonage kitchen to hold, and Rebecca, at Mayor Brooks's suggestion, moved it to the church itself — the same fellowship hall where a Bible study had been interrupted three weeks earlier by the return of Jesus Christ, its scattered clothing and abandoned Bibles finally, gently, gathered and given proper rest by Rebecca's own hands in the days before the room welcomed its first new gathering.

On the last Sunday of that month, close to two hundred people filled the pews of Ashwood Community Baptist Church for the first time since the vanishing — farmers and townspeople, watch volunteers still in their work clothes, elderly widows and orphaned teenagers, Ron Higbee and his wife, Deacon Ellis, an entire family from the far side of the county who had walked six miles on foot after hearing, from a traveler passing through, that something real was happening in Ashwood that was worth the walk. Rebecca stood at the front of that sanctuary — not behind the pulpit itself, which she would not stand behind for many months yet, feeling that particular ground still belonged, in some sense, to her father alone — but beside it, at a small table holding the laptop and the recordings that had become, in a single remarkable month, the closest thing Ashwood possessed to a functioning church.

She played, that Sunday, the very first recording her father had made after the vanishing, the one Rebecca herself had watched alone in his darkened study three weeks earlier and had not, until this moment, shared with anyone beyond her small original circle.

"Church family," his recorded voice said, filling a sanctuary fuller than it had been in years, *"if you're seeing this and you weren't at Bible study Tuesday, I want you to hear something I believe with my whole heart. The Lord is coming back. Maybe not today. Maybe not this year. But He is coming, and when He comes, there will be no time to decide what you believe. The decision has to be made before. So today — hear me — today is the day of salvation."*

By the time the recording ended, dozens of people throughout the sanctuary were on their feet, or on their knees in the aisles, many of them weeping openly, and Rebecca understood, watching it unfold before her — a wave of grief and hope moving through a congregation her father had loved for thirty-one years and would never again see gathered — that the harvest he had spent his entire ministry sowing toward had finally, in the strangest and most sorrowful season imaginable, come fully, undeniably in.

VIII. What Ethan Watched

Ethan Walker stood near the back of the sanctuary that Sunday morning, having come, as he had come every Thursday for a month now, more out of loyalty to the small circle he had grown to depend on than out of any settled certainty of his own — and found himself, watching two hundred strangers and neighbors weep and pray in the aisles of a church he had spent nine years mostly resenting, unable any longer to hold himself entirely apart from what was happening in the room.

He thought of Emily's underlined verse in First Peter — *that they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives* — and understood, standing at the back of that packed sanctuary, that whatever quiet work his wife had begun in him across nine years of patient, uncomplaining faithfulness, this month had finished. He thought of Titus, chapter two, a passage Rebecca had read aloud just the previous Thursday, a phrase that had lodged in him ever since and would not let go: *Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.* He had spent his entire adult life looking for very little beyond the next shift, the next case, the next ordinary Tuesday — and he understood now, watching Sarah Collins kneel in the aisle three rows ahead of him, her face lifted, tears streaming freely down cheeks that had, three weeks earlier, belonged to one of the most committed atheists he had ever personally known, that he no longer wanted a life built around looking for so little.

He did not walk to the front that Sunday. His own surrender, when it finally, fully came, would arrive in its own time, in its own private way, weeks later — but standing at the back of that sanctuary, watching his town rebuild itself not around food or fuel or defense, though it needed all of those things badly, but around something it had lost entirely and was only now, in the wreckage of everything else, beginning to rediscover, Ethan Walker found himself whispering, quietly, to no one but the God he had spent thirty-four years politely ignoring, the first honest, undefended prayer of his adult life.

I'm close, Lord, he thought. *I don't know exactly what's holding me back anymore. Help me finish crossing over.*

IX. Lydia's Record

Lydia Hayes sat in the back pew that Sunday morning with her notebook open on her knee, and found, for the first time in her career, that she was writing not as an observer documenting a story from a careful, professional distance, but as a participant in something she no longer had any interest in holding herself apart from.

She had spent three weeks chronicling Ashwood's survival — the watch, the food council, the rationing, the hard, practical machinery of a town refusing to collapse — and had told herself, in the careful, guarded way she told herself most things, that the spiritual awakening spreading through the parsonage and now the church was simply another story to record, another data point in the town's collective response to catastrophe. She understood now, watching two hundred of her neighbors weep and pray around her, that she had been telling herself a comfortable, professionally convenient lie.

She wrote, in the notebook that would one day become the spine of the only complete history anyone ever compiled of that terrible, luminous summer, a passage she did not initially intend for publication, though it would eventually appear, nearly word for word, in the closing pages of the book she spent the following decade writing:

I came to this church today to record a story. I am leaving having watched something I no longer believe I have the right to call merely a story. Daniel chapter twelve says that many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased — a verse Pastor Whitfield apparently preached more than once, and that I only just now, sitting in this pew, finally understood was not simply about information, but about exactly the kind of desperate, searching movement I have watched sweep through this town in a single month: people running to and fro through the wreckage of everything they knew, and finding, in the ashes, the one thing that turned out never to have been lost at all.

She closed her notebook as the closing prayer began, and for the first time since she had picked up a pen at age eleven and decided she wanted, more than anything else in the world, to write down the truth of things — Lydia Hayes bowed her head, and prayed one of her own.

X. What Remained to Be Done

Rebecca stood at the church doors that afternoon as the congregation filed out into the smoke-hazed daylight, greeting person after person with the particular exhausted, overflowing joy of someone who has spent a month grieving and only just discovered, in the same season, an entirely new reason to keep going. Sarah stood beside her for a while, still faintly disbelieving of her own transformation, watching farmers and widows and orphaned teenagers embrace one another in the church parking lot the way Ashwood residents had once embraced each other, in an ordinary life that already felt impossibly distant, after nothing more consequential than a Friday night football win.

"Two hundred people," Sarah said quietly. "A month ago, half of them didn't believe any of this either."

"A month ago, neither did I," Rebecca said. "Neither did you." She looked back at the church behind them, the simple wooden cross her father had hung with his own hands still standing at the front of a sanctuary that had, in one remarkable Sunday, become fuller than it had been in years. "I keep thinking about something my dad used to say. That revival never looks like what you'd plan for it to look like. It's never convenient, and it's never on your timeline, and it almost always costs something enormous to get there." She wiped her eyes, laughing softly despite the tears, an expression Sarah had come to recognize, in the weeks since Sarah's own conversion, as uniquely Rebecca's — grief and hope occupying the very same breath, the very same moment, without either one needing to cancel the other out. "I don't think he'd be surprised by any of this, honestly. I think this is exactly what he spent thirty-one years praying this town would look like. He just never imagined he'd have to leave in order for it to finally happen."

Above them, the sky remained the same dull, smoke-hazed gray it had been for a month now, the horizon still faintly discolored by fires that had not yet finished burning in cities two states away. The watch still needed volunteers. The hospital still counted its dwindling medicine in days rather than months. Winter, though no one in that church parking lot wanted yet to speak its name aloud, was still coming, and Ashwood's fields, however carefully tended, would not feed eighteen thousand people through it without hard choices still ahead.

But something had shifted in the town that Sunday, something Lydia Hayes would spend the rest of her life trying to properly describe in words, something Rebecca Whitfield understood, standing at her father's church doors with her father's Bible still tucked beneath one arm, as the truest inheritance he could ever have left her: not simply grief for what Ashwood had lost, but the first solid ground of what it was, however imperfectly and at whatever cost, beginning to become.

Part Three — A Town Under Siege

ASHES OF AMERICA — BOOK ONE AFTER THE VANISHING by Dr. Paul Crawford

CHAPTER NINE

Empty Shelves

"I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread." — Psalm 37:25 (KJV)

I. Five Weeks

By the fifth week after the vanishing, Ashwood, Ohio had learned to measure time in a way none of its residents would ever have imagined possible on an ordinary Tuesday in July: not in days of the

calendar, which had come to feel almost meaningless in a world with no newspapers to date and no school year to structure around, but in days of food remaining.

Curtis Boyd's two hundred acres, along with the eleven other working farms that had folded themselves, over the previous month, into the food council Jack Reynolds and Curtis had built together, represented the entire remaining agricultural capacity feeding a town of nearly eighteen thousand people. The corn stood tall and green in every field around Ashwood, promising, if the weather held and the watch kept the fields secure, a harvest sometime in September that might carry the town deep into winter — but promising harvests did not fill empty stomachs in July, and the gap between what Ashwood had already consumed and what its fields would not yield for another six weeks had become, by the fifth week, the single most urgent problem Mayor Daniel Brooks faced every single morning when he woke.

The rationing system Sarah Collins and the food council had built together was, by any honest accounting, remarkably fair — a careful, published formula weighted by household size, by medical need, by age, distributed twice weekly from three collection points around town, the largest of which had become the gravel lot beside Curtis Boyd's largest barn, close enough to the fields themselves to minimize the risk of loss in transit, far enough from the center of town to keep the daily crowds from overwhelming Ashwood's more populated streets.

Fair did not mean sufficient. By the fifth week, the daily ration for an adult had fallen to roughly twelve hundred calories — enough, Sarah told the food council with the same clinical honesty she brought to every difficult report, to prevent outright starvation in the short term, but not enough, over months, to sustain the kind of sustained hard labor the town's farms and defenses now demanded of its strongest residents. Children and the elderly received supplemented portions where the council could manage it. Everyone else had grown, in five weeks, visibly thinner, the particular gauntness that Sarah had begun, privately, to track in her own patients with the same careful vigilance she had once reserved for infectious disease.

"Give us this day our daily bread," Rebecca had taken to reading aloud, from the sixth chapter of Matthew, at the start of every Thursday night gathering, and Sarah had noticed, watching the faces around the growing circle each week, that the words no longer landed as familiar liturgy the way they must once have landed on comfortable Sunday mornings. They landed now as something closer to a genuine, desperate plea — the honest prayer of an entire town that had learned, in the hardest possible way, exactly how fragile the assumption of a full pantry had always actually been.

Sarah tracked the physical toll of that fragility the way she tracked everything else now, in careful notes she kept alongside her official hospital records — a rise in fainting spells among schoolchildren still technically enrolled in a district with no functioning school year to speak of; a spike in irritability and short tempers that she suspected, correctly, had at least as much to do with simple caloric deficit as with grief or fear; a handful of older patients, already frail before the vanishing, whose bodies had simply begun the slow, quiet work of shutting down under a burden of stress and undernutrition that no amount of careful rationing could fully offset. She had begun, without quite deciding to, praying over her patient rounds each morning now, a habit she would have found unimaginable two months earlier, asking God not for miracles exactly, but for the ordinary, unglamorous mercy of enough — enough

grain, enough patience, enough of whatever it actually took to get eighteen thousand people to a September harvest without losing more of themselves than the crisis had already claimed.

II. The Lines

The lines at Curtis Boyd's distribution point began forming before dawn now, families arriving with wagons and wheelbarrows and, in a few resourceful cases, bicycles rigged with makeshift trailers, waiting sometimes three and four hours in the gray, smoke-hazed morning light for a ration that had grown steadily smaller with each passing week.

Lydia Hayes walked the length of that line most mornings now, notebook in hand, recording faces and names and fragments of conversation the way she had recorded everything else since the vanishing — and found, in the fifth week, that the tenor of those conversations had shifted in a way that worried her more than almost anything else she had documented since Ashwood's ordeal began.

The first two weeks of the rationing system, she noted, had produced a kind of grim, communal solidarity — neighbors trading places in line for elderly residents who couldn't stand for hours, mothers sharing what little extra they had with families worse off than their own, the particular decency that crisis sometimes, unpredictably, brought out in people rather than stripped away. By the fifth week, that solidarity had begun, in places, to fray. She heard arguments now over whether a given household's stated size was accurate, whether the council's medical exemptions were being fairly applied, whether certain families — inevitably, in a town this size, families with some prior grievance against their neighbors, old property disputes or decades-old slights suddenly weaponized by hunger — were somehow gaming a system that had almost no capacity left to absorb any additional strain.

"It's not that people have become cruel," she said to Rebecca one evening, sitting at the parsonage table with her notebook open, trying to make sense of five weeks of careful observation. "I don't think that's what's happening, not for most of them. I think hunger does something to a person's ability to reason generously about anyone outside their own immediate family. I've watched genuinely kind people, people I've known my whole life, start counting other families' children with a kind of suspicion I've never once seen from them before. I don't know how to write about that honestly without making it sound like an accusation. But I don't think we can afford to pretend it isn't happening either."

Rebecca thought of Amos, chapter eight, a passage her father had preached only once that she could recall, comparing the physical famine of ancient Israel to a coming spiritual famine, "not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD." She had understood the passage, growing up, as a warning about spiritual neglect. She understood it now, watching Lydia's careful account of Ashwood's fraying patience, as something closer to a diagnosis of what happened to any community, however well-intentioned, when physical need outpaced physical supply for long enough: the deeper hunger, the one for grace and patience and generosity toward a neighbor, tended to starve alongside the body, unless something stronger than mere good intentions was actively feeding it.

III. The Osei Family

Among the families Lydia had come to know best in the growing lines was the Oseis — Folake and her husband Daniel, immigrants from Nigeria who had settled in Ashwood eleven years earlier when Daniel took a position teaching chemistry at the high school, and their two children, nine-year-old Tyler, whose seizure medication Sarah Collins had spent weeks carefully rationing, and thirteen-year-old Amara, whose quiet, watchful maturity had made her, in five short weeks, something close to a fixture in the food line's informal community, helping elderly neighbors carry their portions home, minding younger children while their parents waited.

Folake Osei had been a nurse before the vanishing, working part-time at Ashwood Regional, and had lost, in the vanishing itself, both her sister — visiting from Columbus for what was supposed to be a two-week stay — and her closest friend from the hospital, a fact that had left her, in the weeks since, carrying a grief she rarely spoke of openly, focused instead almost entirely on the immediate, consuming task of keeping her own family fed.

"Tyler's growing," she told Sarah quietly one afternoon, standing at the edge of the distribution line with a look Sarah had come to recognize, in five weeks of treating an entire town through the same catastrophe, as the particular exhaustion of a parent doing arithmetic that refused, no matter how carefully performed, to come out even. "His body needs more calories than his ration provides, especially with the medication. I've been giving him part of my own portion for two weeks now. I don't know how much longer I can keep doing that and still have the strength to stand in this line every single morning."

Sarah adjusted what she could — a supplemental allotment for growing children on anticonvulsant medication, a small concession within a system that had almost no slack left to give — and thought, walking home that evening past a dozen more families facing some version of the exact same impossible arithmetic, of the widow of Zarephath in the seventeenth chapter of First Kings, a passage Rebecca had read aloud just the week before: a woman down to her very last handful of meal and a little oil, preparing what she believed would be her final meal for herself and her son before they starved, and the prophet Elijah's promise to her — *the barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the LORD sendeth rain upon the earth.*

Sarah had found herself, in the weeks since her own conversion, testing every hard circumstance against Scripture with the same rigor she had once applied to differential diagnoses — not because she expected miracles to arrive on command, she was careful to remind herself, but because she had come to believe, with a settled conviction that surprised her every time she noticed it freshly, that the God who had proven Himself real in the matter of her own soul's rescue was not a God who had stopped being present simply because the crisis had shifted from the spiritual to the physical. She did not know how Folake Osei's barrel of meal was going to hold out. She only knew, walking home in the gray evening light, that she intended to keep praying, with the same discipline she brought to everything else in her life, that it somehow would.

IV. The Riot

The trouble that Daniel Brooks had been quietly dreading for weeks finally arrived on a Friday morning in the sixth week, at Curtis Boyd's distribution point, under circumstances that would be argued over and picked apart by nearly everyone in Ashwood for months afterward, in the particular, unsatisfying way that any sudden eruption of violence resists a single clean explanation.

The precipitating cause, as best as Lydia's careful reconstruction later established, was almost absurdly small: a miscount in that morning's grain delivery, a shortfall of perhaps eighty pounds against what the posted allocation had promised, discovered only after the line had already begun moving and word had already begun rippling backward through several hundred waiting, exhausted, hungry people that there might not, after all, be enough left by the time they reached the front.

It should have been a manageable problem — a minor recalculation, an apologetic announcement, perhaps a slightly reduced portion for everyone rather than none at all for those at the back. It became, instead, within the span of perhaps four minutes, something Daniel Brooks would describe afterward as the worst thing he personally witnessed in the entire first year of Ashwood's ordeal.

A man near the middle of the line — not, as it turned out, someone anyone recognized as a longtime Ashwood resident, but a recent arrival, one of the growing number of refugees who had drifted into town over the previous weeks from communities faring far worse than Ashwood's own — began shouting that the shortage was deliberate, that the food council was skimming grain for its own families, an accusation with no basis in fact but with exactly the kind of desperate, hungry plausibility that spread through a crowd faster than any calm correction could ever hope to catch up to it. Within a minute, the shouting had spread. Within two, people near the front of the line, sensing the crowd's mood shifting behind them, began grabbing more than their allotted portions out of pure defensive instinct, afraid the whole supply might vanish before their own turn properly arrived. Within three, the line had broken entirely, dissolving into a surging, shoving crush of desperate people, and it was in the middle of that crush, trampled beneath the feet of neighbors who would spend the rest of their lives unable to fully forgive themselves for what happened in that chaotic handful of seconds, that seventy-one-year-old Otis Vance — the same faithful deacon who had sat with Ray Doss in his darkened sanctuary five weeks earlier and spoken the words that finally broke through the man's denial — went down, and did not get back up.

Noah Simmons was working the distribution table that morning, one of a dozen Remnant volunteers helping check names against the food council's list, and would tell Rebecca afterward that the sound was the part he could not stop hearing in the days that followed — not screaming, exactly, not at first, but a low, rising roar of several hundred human voices all shouting different things at once, rising in pitch as the crowd's shape itself began to change, the orderly, exhausted line folding suddenly inward on itself like a wall giving way to floodwater. He had frozen for one critical second, the way Jack had warned every volunteer they might, the first time real chaos actually arrived rather than merely being drilled for — and then, remembering his single job, had done the only useful thing available to a seventeen-year-old with no weapon and no training: he grabbed the radio at his hip and screamed for help into it, over and over, running toward the watch's forward position rather than away from the crush, because Jack's voice in his head, from a dozen briefings, told him clearly that panic radiating outward from the center only made everything worse.

Jack Reynolds and four members of the watch reached the center of the crowd within ninety seconds of Noah's call, working with the same disciplined, controlled urgency Jack had drilled into every one of them since the very first briefing — wedging themselves bodily into gaps in the crush, using their own frames as barriers, shouting instructions in the same flat, carrying command voice Jack had once used to hold formation under fire in far more hostile ground than a gravel farm lot in Ohio. Slowly, agonizingly, the crowd's panic broke against that wall of calm, deliberate authority, the crush easing enough for people to find their own footing again, for the surge to reverse itself into something closer to horrified stillness. But ninety seconds, against the particular violence of several hundred desperate, hungry people surging in a confined space, had already been too long.

They found Otis Vance near the center of where the crush had been worst, folded against the wheel of a parked pickup truck, and Curtis Boyd, kneeling over him before Jack even reached the spot, was already shouting for the ambulance, his big farmer's hands pressed uselessly, helplessly, against injuries he had no way of knowing how to treat.

Sarah Collins, summoned by radio and arriving within minutes in the hospital's one remaining working ambulance, worked over Otis Vance for nearly twenty minutes in the gravel lot beside Curtis Boyd's barn, kneeling in the dust with Dana Pruitt beside her, doing everything her training and her dwindling supplies allowed — and lost him anyway, the internal injuries from the crush simply beyond what even a fully stocked trauma center, let alone a rationed rural hospital five weeks into a national collapse, could have repaired. She sat back on her heels afterward, in the sudden, terrible quiet of a crowd that had gone from riot to stunned, grief-stricken silence in the space of half an hour, and found herself, for the first time since her own conversion five weeks earlier, praying not for healing but for something harder to ask for honestly: the strength to keep believing, in the very moment the evidence in front of her seemed most determined to argue otherwise, that the God she had only recently, carefully, rationally concluded was real had not simply looked away.

V. What the Town Buried

Otis Vance was buried two days later in the small cemetery behind Ashwood Community Baptist Church, in a service that drew, by Lydia's careful count, close to four hundred people — nearly double the crowd that had filled the sanctuary for its first post-vanishing Sunday service, a fact that struck Rebecca, standing at the graveside preparing to speak, as one of the more painful ironies of the entire ordeal: that it had taken an actual death, a literal loss the whole town could grieve together, to draw out mourners in numbers the resurrection of faith itself had not yet fully managed.

She spoke from Psalm twenty-three, a passage she had read at her own mother's funeral six years earlier and had not been able to read since without her voice breaking, though it did not break this time, steadied by something she recognized now as a settled confidence she simply had not possessed six years ago. *"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."* She spoke of Otis Vance's quiet, steady faithfulness across decades of ordinary Tuesdays that no one had ever thought to call remarkable until the week they discovered how remarkable ordinary faithfulness actually was — his years of service as a deacon, his gentle words to Ray Doss in a darkened sanctuary that had, in their own small way, helped save a

pastor's soul, his final act of standing in a food line at seventy-one years old not for himself, Rebecca reminded the gathered crowd, but to bring his portion home to a grandson too young to stand in line himself.

Daniel Brooks stood near the back of the graveside crowd, his face carrying a weight Lydia had not seen on him even in the darkest hours of the first two weeks, and understood, watching Otis Vance's simple wooden casket lowered into ground that had, until five weeks ago, never once needed to bury a resident lost to hunger or panic rather than age or illness, that Ashwood had just crossed a line it could never uncross — the line between a community bruised and frightened by catastrophe, and a community that had, however unintentionally, allowed its own desperation to cost the life of one of its gentlest members.

"We are going to fix this," he told the food council that evening, his voice carrying a hard, unyielding resolve that had not been there in earlier weeks. "Not tomorrow. Tonight. I don't care how many more hands it takes, how many more hours the watch has to work, how much harder we have to make the distribution process. I am not burying another Otis Vance because we let hunger turn four hundred good people into a mob for four minutes."

VI. What Changed

The food council spent that entire night, and most of the following day, redesigning the distribution system from the ground up, and what emerged, by the end of that difficult week, bore little resemblance to the single crowded gravel lot that had claimed Otis Vance's life. Jack split the process into eight smaller collection points scattered across town rather than three large ones, each capped at a number the watch could physically secure, each staffed by at least two armed volunteers standing visibly at the perimeter rather than only reacting once trouble began. Curtis Boyd, at Sarah's suggestion, began issuing numbered tokens to households the week before each distribution, assigning specific pickup windows rather than allowing an open, unstructured line to form at all, a change that added logistical complexity the food council had resisted for weeks out of sheer exhaustion, but that eliminated, almost entirely, the crush of hundreds of people converging on a single point at a single hour.

Daniel Brooks stood before a packed town hall meeting three days after Otis Vance's funeral and did something he had not done since the very first gathering on the town hall steps five weeks earlier: he apologized, plainly and without qualification, for a system that had, in his own words, "asked too much patience of too many hungry people for too many weeks without building in the safeguards a town this size actually needed from the very first day." It cost him something visible to say it, Lydia noted in her account of the meeting, and it bought him, in return, something she had not expected — not anger from the crowd, but a kind of exhausted, grateful trust, the particular loyalty a community sometimes extends to a leader willing to own a failure rather than explain it away.

"Proverbs sixteen, verse three," Ruth Colby said to Lydia afterward, in the parking lot outside the town hall, the same way she seemed to attach a reference to nearly everything now. "'Commit thy works unto the LORD, and thy thoughts shall be established.' I've watched that man carry this whole town on his own back for five weeks, dear, same as I watched Otis carry his own small corner of it faithfully for

thirty years before him. I don't know that either one of them ever thought of himself as especially remarkable. I think that's usually exactly the kind of man God ends up using the most."

VII. The Remnant's Answer

It was Rebecca, in the days following the funeral, who proposed the change that would, in the weeks and months ahead, do more to steady Ashwood's fraying patience than any adjustment to the food council's formal rationing formula ever managed on its own.

"My father used to talk about the early church, in the book of Acts," she told the food council, standing before them with her father's Bible open to a passage she had marked days earlier. "Acts two, verses forty-four and forty-five. 'And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.' I'm not saying we can rebuild an entire economy on that model overnight. But I think what's missing from our distribution system isn't fairness — Sarah and Curtis built something genuinely fair. What's missing is the sense, for the people standing in that line every morning, that anyone actually sees them as more than a number on a ration sheet."

What emerged from that conversation, over the following two weeks, was a second, informal system running alongside the food council's official rationing — a growing network Rebecca and the Remnant organized directly out of the church, connecting families with genuine excess, however small, to families in genuine crisis, coordinated not through any formal bureaucracy but through the simple, patient relational work of people who had come to know their neighbors' actual circumstances through months of shared grief and shared worship. Ron Higbee, whose small home distribution counter had never fully closed even after Higbee's Grocery itself lay in ruins, became one of its central hubs, quietly setting aside a portion of whatever he could source for families like the Oseis whose needs the official ration simply could not fully meet. Curtis Boyd began designating a small, separate share of his own farm's yield specifically for the Remnant's discretionary use, a decision that cost his own family real hardship and that he made, he told Rebecca simply, because Second Corinthians nine, verse seven, had been sitting on his conscience for two weeks and would not let him alone: *"Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver."*

Amara Osei, thirteen years old, began volunteering three mornings a week distributing the Remnant's supplemental shares to families even more stretched than her own, a fact her mother discovered only when another parent mentioned it to her in passing, and that left Folake Osei standing in her own kitchen in tears, understanding, she told Rebecca later, that her daughter had absorbed something in five weeks of catastrophe that Folake herself had spent a lifetime hoping to model for her and had never quite managed to demonstrate so plainly herself: that generosity did not wait for abundance to arrive before it began giving.

VIII. What Jack Carried

Jack Reynolds visited Otis Vance's grave alone, three days after the funeral, in the gray early light before his morning watch rotation began, and stood there for a long time without speaking, the same

stillness that had settled over him after the Boyd farm shooting five weeks earlier now returned, deepened, harder to shake.

"I keep running it back," he told Walt Henderson that evening, the two of them sitting once more on Walt's porch in the fading light, a ritual that had become, in five weeks, something closer to a standing appointment than either man had planned. "Ninety seconds. That's how long it took us to reach the center of that crowd. I've run operations where ninety seconds was the difference between a mission succeeding clean and a mission costing lives, and I know — I know, intellectually — that ninety seconds was fast, given the chaos, given how many people were in that lot. But Otis Vance is dead, Walt, and I keep thinking there had to be something I could have restructured, some earlier warning sign I should have caught, some better position I should have had my people standing in."

Walt was quiet for a long moment, watching the smoke-hazed sun sink toward the western fields. "You ever consider," he said finally, "that carrying every death like it's a failure of your own planning is its own kind of pride, son? I don't say that to wound you. I say it because I watched my own father carry Korea that exact same way for forty years, and it cost him nearly every good year he had left after he came home." He turned to look at Jack directly. "First Peter five, verse seven. 'Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.' That's not a suggestion, Jack. It's an instruction. You did your job, and you did it well, and Otis Vance still died, because we are living in a broken world doing broken things to broken people, and no amount of tactical perfection on your part was ever going to fully undo that. The casting isn't optional. It's the only thing that's going to let you keep doing this work without it eventually costing you everything the way it nearly cost my father."

Jack did not answer right away. But he came to the Thursday night gathering that week for the first time in nearly a month, sitting quietly near the back of the growing circle at the church, and when Rebecca invited anyone who wished to pray aloud for the town's grief, Jack Reynolds, who had still not once in five weeks called himself a believer in the settled way Rebecca and Sarah now did, found himself, to his own considerable surprise, bowing his head and praying — haltingly, imperfectly, casting, for the first time in longer than he could remember, at least a portion of his own carefully guarded care onto shoulders he was only beginning to trust might actually be capable of bearing it.

IX. What Ethan Finished

It was Ethan Walker, sitting beside Jack in that same gathering, who finally, quietly, crossed the threshold he had been standing at the edge of for five long weeks.

He had spent the days since Otis Vance's funeral doing what he always did with grief too large to sit with directly — working, patrolling, throwing himself into the practical machinery of the watch with an intensity that even Jack had gently suggested might be as much avoidance as dedication. But something about standing at that graveside, watching a town he loved bury a good man over eighty pounds of grain, had cracked something in him that five weeks of careful, incremental searching had not quite managed to finish cracking on its own.

"I keep thinking about Emily," he said quietly, when Rebecca asked, near the end of that Thursday's gathering, whether anyone had something on their heart they wanted to share. "About how she used to

say grace before every meal, even the small ones, even when I used to roll my eyes and tell her the food was getting cold. I understand it now. I think I finally understand what she was actually doing, every single time — she wasn't just being polite to God before a meal. She was building a habit of gratitude strong enough to carry her through a day like the one we just buried Otis Vance because of." He turned Emily's Bible over in his hands, the same worn leather he had carried with him to nearly every Thursday gathering since the first one. "I don't want to keep standing at the edge of this anymore. I've read enough. I've watched enough — watched Rebecca, watched Sarah, watched Jack tonight, even, doing something I don't think he expected to do either. I think I've known the answer for weeks and I've just been too proud, or too scared, to actually say it out loud."

Rebecca opened her father's Bible to Romans, chapter ten, the same passage Noah had read haltingly, uncertainly, five weeks earlier in this same kitchen before it became this larger circle at the church. *"That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."*

Ethan Walker, thirty-four years old, a police lieutenant who had spent his entire adult life trusting evidence he could see and touch and measure, closed his eyes in the small circle of lantern light at the front of Ashwood Community Baptist Church, and said the words he had been circling, in his own private, guarded way, for five entire weeks.

"I believe it," he said. "I believe Jesus died and rose again. I believe Emily was right about everything, every single day she prayed for me and never once made me feel small for not believing it yet. I'm asking You to save me, God, the same way You saved her, the same way You're apparently saving half this town one broken, grieving heart at a time. I'm done standing at the edge of it. I want in."

When he opened his eyes, Rebecca was crying, and Sarah was crying, and even Jack Reynolds, sitting beside him with his own faith still unfinished, still circling, reached over and gripped Ethan's shoulder with a firmness that said, more clearly than any words could have, exactly how much the moment meant to a man not yet ready to fully claim it for himself.

X. What Remained

The harvest was still six weeks away. The food council's formula, however carefully adjusted after Otis Vance's death, still left every family in Ashwood measuring calories the way they had once measured nothing more consequential than a grocery list. The lines still formed before dawn, and would go on forming for months yet, through a winter no one in that Thursday night circle wanted yet to speak of aloud.

But something had shifted, in the six weeks since the vanishing, that Daniel Brooks found himself, walking home in the smoke-hazed evening light after that week's food council meeting, unable to fully name and equally unable to dismiss. A town that might, in a different set of circumstances, have simply hardened into the kind of hungry, suspicious, every-family-for-itself collapse that Lydia's careful reporting suggested was already consuming towns just twenty and thirty miles away, had instead —

imperfectly, at real cost, with real graves now standing behind its oldest church — begun to organize its own grief and its own hunger around something larger than mere survival.

"Give, and it shall be given unto you," Rebecca had read that same Thursday night, from the sixth chapter of Luke, a passage she said her father had preached almost every harvest season of his ministry, *"good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom."* Ashwood had not yet seen its own measure running over. It had, by any honest accounting, seen exactly the opposite — scarcity, grief, a death that would haunt the town's collective memory for the rest of its history. But standing in his own driveway that evening, looking north toward a horizon still faintly discolored by fires two states away, Daniel Brooks found himself believing, for the first time in six exhausting weeks, that the town he had spent eight years serving might actually be building, in the wreckage of everything else it had lost, something worth the terrible cost of its building.

ASHES OF AMERICA — BOOK ONE AFTER THE VANISHING by Dr. Paul Crawford

CHAPTER TEN

The First Refugees

"Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." — Hebrews 13:2 (KJV)

I. What the Roads Carried

They began arriving in Ashwood in twos and threes during the fifth and sixth weeks, and by the start of the seventh, they were arriving by the hundreds — a slow, ragged tide of exhausted, hollow-eyed men, women, and children walking in from every direction the roads led, most of them on foot, a few pushing shopping carts or children's wagons loaded with whatever they had managed to salvage before their own communities collapsed entirely beneath them.

They came from Cleveland's outer suburbs, from towns along the interstate corridor that had lost their own power grids and their own law enforcement and had never managed to organize themselves the way Ashwood had, from as far away as the ruined edges of Columbus, seventy miles south, where a woman named Patricia Deng told Lydia Hayes, sitting exhausted on an overturned bucket at the edge of what had become Ashwood's growing refugee intake point, that she had walked for six days with her two teenage sons because a rumor had reached her — one rumor among the hundreds now circulating across a broken Ohio — that a small town called Ashwood had somehow managed to keep its lights of order burning, however dimly, when so much of everywhere else had gone dark.

"We heard you had a working government," Patricia said, her voice cracked from days of walking and days before that of grief neither Lydia nor anyone else in Ashwood could yet fully measure. "We heard you had food, and doctors, and people who hadn't turned on each other yet. I didn't know if it was true.

I walked anyway, because staying where we were had stopped being a choice with any good outcomes left in it."

By the end of the seventh week, Daniel Brooks's best estimate — compiled from the intake logs Lydia and a growing team of volunteers had begun keeping at the edge of town — put the number of refugees who had passed through or settled near Ashwood at close to three thousand, a number that threatened, within a matter of days, to nearly double the population of a town whose own food supply had already cost one of its gentlest members his life over a shortfall of eighty pounds of grain.

Noah Simmons, still assigned to communications duty along the county's outer roads, was often among the first Ashwood faces the arriving refugees actually saw, and he found the work harder, in its own quiet way, than the night at the Boyd farm had ever been. There was no single moment of crisis to brace against, no clean adrenaline to carry him through it — only an endless, grinding procession of exhausted strangers, hour after hour, each one carrying a version of the same devastation he had lived through himself two months earlier, magnified by miles of walking and days without reliable food or water. He found himself, more than once, simply sitting with a frightened child while a parent was processed at the checkpoint, offering nothing more than his presence and, when a family seemed open to it, a few quiet words about a town three miles ahead that had not yet given up on people the way so much of the rest of the world apparently had.

"You remind me of my own boy," an older man named Everett Simms told him one afternoon, resting on an overturned crate at the edge of the road, his own family scattered somewhere behind him in the slower-moving column, a fact he spoke of with a controlled, careful grief Noah had come to recognize instantly in nearly everyone who reached Ashwood's outer checkpoint. "Seventeen, same as you. Vanished the same afternoon as half his graduating class. I used to tell him church was for people who needed a crutch. I'd give anything now to tell him I was wrong before he ever had to find out the hard way, without me there to say it."

Noah did not have a polished answer for that kind of grief, not yet, not at seventeen himself with his own losses still raw beneath the surface of every ordinary day. He simply sat with the man for a while, and eventually, without quite planning to, told him about the small worn New Testament a stranger had once handed him behind a darkened church, and about a kitchen table where four grieving, searching people had once decided, together, that it was not too late to open a door they had spent years leaving closed.

II. The Meeting That Split the Room

Daniel Brooks called the town's leadership together on a Tuesday evening in the church fellowship hall — the same room where a Bible study had once been interrupted by the Rapture itself, its scattered belongings long since gathered and put to rest, now serving, in these difficult weeks, as one of the only spaces in Ashwood large enough to hold a conversation this consequential.

"I need to say plainly what we're facing," Brooks began, standing before Jack, Ethan, Sarah, Curtis Boyd, Rebecca, and a dozen others who had, in seven short weeks, become the closest thing Ashwood possessed to a governing council. "We do not have enough food for the people already living inside our

own boundary lines. We are six weeks from harvest, and we buried Otis Vance three weeks ago because our existing system nearly broke under its own weight. And every single day, more people are arriving at our borders, hungry, sick, some of them armed, none of them screened, all of them asking us for exactly the kind of help we are not entirely certain we can give without endangering the people who are already here."

Jack Reynolds spoke first, his voice carrying the flat, careful weight of a man who had spent the previous night walking the county's outer roads assessing exactly this problem from a tactical standpoint. "I'm not going to stand here and tell you to turn away hurting people," he said. "But I am going to tell you what I know to be true from more experience than I ever wanted with exactly this kind of situation: an uncontrolled influx of desperate strangers is how communities get infiltrated, how food stores get raided from the inside, how a town's own defenses get quietly hollowed out by people who never intended harm when they arrived but who get desperate enough, eventually, to take what they need by force. I watched refugee crises overseas turn into humanitarian catastrophes not because the people fleeing were bad people, but because nobody built the structure fast enough to manage the scale. If we're going to do this, and I think we have to, it has to be organized. Screened. Controlled. Or it will break us just as surely as turning everyone away at gunpoint would, just slower, and with more of our own people paying the price alongside theirs."

Rebecca had been quiet through most of Jack's assessment, her father's Bible open on her lap to a passage she had marked that afternoon, anticipating exactly this argument. "I don't disagree with anything Jack just said about the mechanics," she said, when Brooks turned to her. "But I want this council to hear something else before we build a policy purely around risk. Leviticus nineteen, verse thirty-four: 'The stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.' And Matthew twenty-five — Jesus Himself, describing the final judgment, separating the faithful from the unfaithful not by their doctrine, but by exactly this question: 'I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in.' I am not saying we should be reckless. I am saying that if Ashwood becomes a town that hoards its own safety at the total expense of the suffering arriving at its doorstep, we will have kept our bodies alive while losing something my father would have said mattered a great deal more."

Sarah spoke next, her voice carrying the particular weight of a physician who had spent seven weeks watching scarcity claim lives in slow, grinding increments. "There's a third problem neither of you have raised yet," she said. "Disease. Three thousand people who've been walking for days through contaminated water sources, sleeping outdoors, with no medical care and no sanitation, represent a public health risk this hospital is not currently equipped to handle if it turns into something like dysentery or worse spreading through a camp we haven't properly organized. I need any refugee intake process to include medical screening and a separated area for anyone showing signs of illness, or we risk trading a food crisis for an epidemic that could kill far more people, on both sides of this argument, than either extreme policy would."

Curtis Boyd spoke next, and his words carried a particular weight given how directly his own farm's yield stood to be affected by any decision the council made. "I've got eleven other families' futures riding on this harvest same as I've got my own," he said. "I'm not going to pretend that doesn't matter to

me. But I buried Otis Vance three weeks ago because we ran short by eighty pounds of grain among people who already belonged here. I don't know how we look ourselves in the eye if we turn away three thousand more and then watch this council spend the winter congratulating itself on how carefully it protected what it had, while people freeze and starve within sight of our own fences."

"Nobody on this council is suggesting we turn anyone away outright," Jack said, an edge of frustration entering his voice for the first time that evening. "I need everyone here to hear what I'm actually saying, because it isn't what half of you think it is. I'm not arguing against helping these people. I watched a woman walk into this county yesterday carrying a baby who hadn't eaten in two days, and I gave her my own lunch without thinking twice about it, same as any of you would have. What I'm arguing is that good intentions without structure get good people killed — not eventually, not abstractly, but specifically and predictably, the way Otis Vance died specifically and predictably because we built a system that assumed goodwill would hold up under conditions it was never actually designed to survive. I want to help every single person walking those roads toward us right now. I also want to still have a town left standing to help them with in six months."

Ethan, who had said little through most of the debate, finally spoke from the back of the room, his voice quieter than Jack's but carrying its own settled conviction. "I spent twelve years enforcing laws that assumed a functioning state behind me — courts, jails, a whole system that could absorb the hard cases so individual officers didn't have to solve every moral question themselves in the middle of a crisis. We don't have that anymore. Whatever we decide tonight, we're deciding it as the only authority left standing between order and chaos for this whole corner of the state. I don't take that lightly, and I don't think anybody in this room does either. But I'd rather build something too careful and adjust it as we learn, than build something too open and bury a second Otis Vance figuring out the hard way where the line should have been."

The debate ran for nearly three hours after that, sharp at times, honest in a way Lydia's careful notes captured with unusual precision — because it was, she wrote later, the first genuine disagreement she had watched Ashwood's leadership have since the vanishing, the first time compassion and caution had stood in open, unresolved tension in front of the whole council rather than being quietly assumed to point in the same direction. What finally emerged, close to midnight, was neither Jack's full caution nor Rebecca's full openness, but something built, however imperfectly, out of both.

III. The Camp at the Fairgrounds

The Richland County Fairgrounds, a mile east of town, became, within days, the site of what Ashwood's residents had begun calling, half informally and half with a weight that would eventually become permanent, the Refuge — a screened, organized camp built around the fairground's existing structures, capable, by the food council's careful calculation, of receiving and sustaining perhaps eight hundred new arrivals at any given time without collapsing the town's already fragile food supply entirely.

The system Jack designed, working now alongside Ethan's remaining officers and a growing corps of watch volunteers, was neither cruel nor naive. Every arriving family was met at a checkpoint a half

mile outside the fairground boundary, registered by name, questioned carefully but respectfully about where they had come from and what had happened to their own communities, and searched — gently, but thoroughly — for weapons, which were catalogued and held rather than confiscated outright, to be returned, Brooks insisted over some quiet grumbling from a handful of the watch, the moment a family left Ashwood's boundaries again, because, as Brooks put it, "we are not going to become the kind of town that disarms desperate people and then asks them to simply trust us with their safety."

Sarah organized a medical triage tent at the camp's entrance, staffed on a rotating basis by herself, Dana Pruitt, and two retired nurses who had come out of a comfortable retirement to work harder, in their sixties and seventies, than either of them had worked in decades — screening every arrival for fever, for the telltale signs of dysentery or cholera that untreated water sources made a constant, looming threat, separating anyone showing symptoms into a quarantine section built from repurposed 4-H livestock barns until it could be determined whether they posed a genuine risk to the camp's larger population.

And Rebecca, with the full support of the Remnant, established what quickly became the emotional and spiritual center of the entire operation — a welcome station just past the medical tent, staffed by volunteers offering not just the camp's carefully rationed food, but coffee where it could still be found, blankets, quiet conversation, and, for anyone who wanted it, a place to simply sit and grieve without being rushed toward the next practical task. She brought her father's recordings there within the first week, playing them on the same borrowed laptop that had once filled an empty sanctuary, and found, standing at the edge of a fairground exhibit hall turned refugee shelter, that grief-stricken strangers arriving from the ruins of Cleveland and Columbus were, if anything, even more immediately and completely open to the message than Ashwood's own residents had been in the earliest weeks — men and women who had lost everything, watched their own cities burn, walked days on empty roads with nothing left to lose, arriving at a small Ohio town's fairground and finding, improbably, the one thing that had survived the collapse of everything else they had ever trusted.

"Isaiah fifty-eight, verse seven," Rebecca read aloud to a gathered circle at the welcome station on the camp's third night, the words carrying clearly across a crowd of exhausted new arrivals huddled close for warmth against the evening chill. *"'Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?'"* She looked out at faces that had, only days earlier, belonged to a functioning American city that no longer existed. "I don't know what all of you have lost to get here," she said. "I lost my father in the vanishing, and I spent years mocking everything he believed before I finally understood he'd been telling the truth all along. I don't have an easy answer for why any of this happened, or why God allowed it. But I can tell you that this town, imperfect as it is, scared as it is, hungry as it is, is trying, with everything it has left, to be exactly the kind of neighbor Isaiah describes right here. You are not naked and cast out anymore. You are, for as long as you need to be, ours."

IV. The Alvarez Family

Among the families who arrived that first difficult week was Miguel and Carmen Alvarez, along with their three children — nine-year-old twins, Sofia and Mateo, and a six-month-old infant, Isabel, who

Carmen had carried the entire seventy-mile walk from the ruins of Cleveland's western suburbs strapped against her chest, refusing, even at the point of her own collapse, to let anyone else carry the burden for more than a few exhausted minutes at a time.

Miguel had been an electrician before the vanishing, a skill that would prove, within days of his arrival, to be one of the more valuable trades to reach Ashwood since the pulse — able, working alongside Roy Castillo at the hospital, to help rig a series of small, carefully shielded solar panels salvaged from a farm supply store that had, remarkably, survived both the looting and the pulse's reach, extending the hospital's dwindling generator fuel by weeks rather than days. Carmen had been a special education teacher, and within two weeks of arriving at the Refuge had organized, entirely on her own initiative, a school of sorts for the growing number of refugee children now living at the fairgrounds — not a full curriculum, not yet, but enough structure and enough simple kindness to give traumatized children a few hours a day that felt, however briefly, like something other than catastrophe.

Sarah met the family on their second night at the camp, called to the medical tent when baby Isabel spiked a dangerous fever, and spent nearly six hours working to bring the infant's temperature down with the limited resources the tent could offer, Carmen sitting beside her the entire time, praying in a low, steady murmur of Spanish that Sarah did not need to translate to understand completely.

"You're a believer," Sarah said quietly, sometime past three in the morning, watching Isabel's fever finally begin to break.

"My whole family, before this happened," Carmen said. "My mother, my sisters, half my parish. All gone in the same instant, standing right beside me at my cousin's quinceañera rehearsal. I have spent seven weeks asking God why He would take them and leave me behind with three children and no home." She looked down at Isabel, sleeping now, her small chest rising and falling steadily for the first time in hours. "But tonight, in this camp, in a town I'd never even heard of two months ago, a doctor who didn't have to stayed six hours to save my daughter's life. I think I finally understand a little of what He's still doing, even now. Even here."

Sarah thought of Luke ten, the parable of the Good Samaritan, a passage Rebecca had read at the welcome station just that week — a story about mercy extended not by the people with every religious reason to offer it, but by an outsider willing to stop, to bind up wounds, to spend his own resources on a stranger's survival with no promise of anything in return. She had read it a dozen times in the weeks since her own conversion. She understood it now, sitting exhausted in a fairground medical tent at three in the morning with a sleeping infant finally out of danger, in a way that no amount of careful theological study could have taught her nearly as well.

The Alvarez family stayed at the fairground camp for eleven days before Miguel's electrical skills earned the family a small vacated house near the hospital, offered by an elderly widow named Constance Yoder who had more room than she could use alone and who told Rebecca, without a trace of self-congratulation, that Isaiah fifty-eight had convicted her too thoroughly to keep three empty bedrooms to herself while a family with an infant slept on cots in a repurposed livestock barn. Carmen's makeshift school grew, in that same short span, from a handful of children sitting on hay bales to nearly forty, refugee and Ashwood-born alike, and Daniel Brooks, visiting the fairground on an inspection tour in the camp's third week, found himself standing at the edge of Carmen's lesson for a

full ten minutes, watching a Cleveland special education teacher lead a circle of traumatized children through a simple counting song, before he could make himself walk on to the next item on his clipboard.

"I keep thinking we're the ones doing the rescuing here," he told Sarah afterward, "and then I watch something like that, and I wonder how much of what's actually saving this town isn't coming from us at all. It's coming in through that checkpoint every single day, carried by exactly the people we were so afraid of two weeks ago."

V. What Ethan Caught

Not every arrival at the Refuge's checkpoint told the truth about who they were, and it was Ethan Walker, in the camp's second week, who first caught the pattern that would, within days, prove Jack's earlier caution justified in the most concrete way possible.

A group of four men arrived together, claiming to be unrelated refugees who had simply fallen in together on the road from the same devastated stretch of Interstate 71 — a plausible enough story, one Ethan had heard variations of dozens of times already, except that something about the group's coordination, the way they positioned themselves during questioning, the careful, rehearsed consistency of their individual accounts, struck him with the specific, trained unease of a police lieutenant who had spent twelve years learning to notice exactly this kind of subtle wrongness.

He separated them for individual questioning, a step the intake process allowed for but rarely required, and found, within twenty minutes, enough small inconsistencies in their stories — a claimed hometown two of them could not accurately describe, a timeline that didn't survive careful cross-examination — to escalate the matter to Jack directly.

What followed was a tense, careful confrontation at the checkpoint's edge, conducted with the same restraint Jack had insisted on since the very first briefing of the watch, and it ended not in violence but in a confession: the four men had been scouting Ashwood's defenses and food stores on behalf of a small band operating out of the ruins of a collapsed town twenty miles east, intending to return with detailed information about the camp's security gaps that would allow a larger, better-armed group to strike the fairgrounds directly within the week.

"They weren't cruel men, not at the start of this," Jack told the council afterward, in a report Lydia recorded carefully for the growing archive she now understood might someday matter to far more people than just Ashwood's own residents. "Two of them told me, once it was clear the game was up, that their own town had been overrun by exactly this kind of raid eight days ago — a group posing as refugees, admitted in good faith, who turned on their hosts once they'd mapped the town's weaknesses from the inside. Their own community's mayor is dead. Half their neighbors are dead. And rather than learning from it, they've apparently decided the lesson is to become the wolves themselves, before somebody else does it to them first."

Daniel Brooks absorbed this in the same heavy silence he had absorbed every hard piece of news since the vanishing began, and understood, hearing it, that Jack's original caution had not been paranoia. It had been, exactly as Jack had warned, the difference between a refuge and a vulnerability — and that

the town's survival, going forward, was going to depend on holding both compassion and vigilance in the same tired, careful hands, without ever fully surrendering either one to the other.

VI. A City of Refuge

It was Rebecca, reading through her father's sermon notes that same week, searching for some way to help the council frame the delicate balance they were now navigating, who found the passage that would, in the months ahead, become something close to Ashwood's unofficial motto.

"Numbers thirty-five," she told the council, gathered once more in the church fellowship hall. "God commanded Israel to establish cities of refuge — specific places where someone who had caused a death, even accidentally, could flee and be protected from vengeance while the matter was properly judged. These weren't places without law, without screening, without careful process. Verse twelve says explicitly that the accused had to stand trial before the elders before receiving that protection. But they were also, unmistakably, places built for mercy — a designated, deliberate answer to the ancient world's instinct to simply let the desperate be destroyed by whoever was angry enough or strong enough to destroy them." She looked around the room at faces that had, in eight difficult weeks, aged years. "I think that's what we're actually trying to build at that fairground. Not an open door with no discernment behind it — my father would never have preached that, and neither will I. But not a locked gate either. Something in between, hard as that middle ground is to hold. A city of refuge, for a broken country that doesn't have very many of them left standing anymore."

Daniel Brooks had the phrase painted, within the week, on a simple wooden sign at the fairground's checkpoint, beneath the more practical instructions for registration and screening: ASHWOOD — A CITY OF REFUGE. It was not, Lydia noted in her own account, a claim without cost. The camp's population, even carefully capped, strained the food council's supply lines further with every passing week. The screening process caught, in the months that followed, three more attempts at infiltration beyond the first, each one a fresh reminder of exactly how real Jack's original caution had been. Genuine refugees, honestly fleeing honest catastrophe, sometimes waited hours at the checkpoint under justified but exhausting suspicion before being cleared and welcomed in.

But it held. Through that difficult seventh and eighth week, as the corn in Curtis Boyd's fields inched slowly toward a September harvest still weeks away, as the hospital's dwindling supplies stretched thinner across a population that had nearly doubled its original need, as the watch worked longer hours screening a steady stream of new arrivals against the ever-present risk that the next group at the checkpoint might not be who they claimed — Ashwood held its strange, costly, deliberate balance between vigilance and welcome, and did not, in the end, become either the hardened fortress Jack's darkest fears had once warned against, or the undefended vulnerability that the four scouts from the fallen town twenty miles east had come hoping to exploit.

VII. The Man at the Gate

It was Noah who saw him first, on the evening of the camp's ninth day — a tall, unhurried figure walking in from the eastern road, unhurried in a way that struck Noah immediately, even from a

distance, as somehow different from the exhausted, shuffling gait of every other arrival he had watched cross that same stretch of pavement for over a week.

He recognized the man before he was close enough to properly see his face — the same calm bearing, the same worn leather satchel, the same quality of attention that had once made a seventeen-year-old boy feel, sitting alone in a dark churchyard two months earlier, that he was being truly seen for the first time since his parents disappeared.

"You're still walking these roads," Noah said, when the man reached the checkpoint, more statement than question.

"There are a great many roads left to walk, and not nearly enough time left to walk all of them," Gabriel Stone said, setting his satchel down without being asked, submitting to Ethan's careful, routine search with the same unbothered patience he seemed to bring to everything. "You've grown since the churchyard, Noah. Not just taller. I can see it in your face. You're carrying other people's grief now, alongside your own. That's a heavier road than the one you were walking two months ago."

"How do you keep finding your way to exactly the places that need finding?" Ethan asked, straightening up from the search, unable to keep a note of genuine bewilderment out of his voice.

"The same way anyone finds their way anywhere in a broken world, Lieutenant," the man said, with the faint, knowing warmth Noah remembered from their first meeting. "I listen for where the door's still standing open, and I go stand in it a while, in case someone needs a reminder that it hasn't shut yet." He looked past the checkpoint, toward the fairground's lantern-lit rows of cots and tents, toward Rebecca's welcome station where a small crowd had gathered for that evening's reading. "I understand this town has become something of a city of refuge these last few weeks. I'd like to see it, if I'm permitted."

He stayed three days, though no one — not Noah, not Rebecca, not even Lydia, who tried more than once to properly interview him for her growing archive — could ever afterward piece together exactly where he slept, or ate, or spent the hours he wasn't visible among the camp's rows of exhausted new arrivals, sitting with the grieving, quoting Scripture with the same easy, unhurried familiarity he'd shown Noah in the churchyard, and then, on the morning of the fourth day, was simply gone again, the way he always seemed to go — without farewell, without explanation, leaving behind only the particular, settled peace of the people he'd spent time with, and a small folded note at Rebecca's welcome station table that read, in a hand none of them recognized: *Luke 12:35–36. Keep your lamps burning. You do not know the hour, but you are closer to it than you think.*

VIII. What Lydia Wrote

Lydia Hayes stood at the edge of the fairground camp on the evening of its second week, watching Carmen Alvarez's children play a simple game of tag among the exhibit hall's rows of cots with a handful of Ashwood's own children, refugee and resident laughter mixing together in a way that would have seemed, eight weeks earlier, like the most ordinary sound in the world, and now struck Lydia as something closer to a small, fragile miracle.

She thought of Deuteronomy ten, verse nineteen, a verse Rebecca had quoted to the council in the earliest days of the debate and that Lydia had carried with her ever since, turning it over the way she turned over every fact she gathered now before committing it to her permanent record: *"Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt."* She thought, too, of the four men Jack's screening had caught, of the collapsed town twenty miles east whose own desperate turn toward predation had sent them here, and understood, writing that week's entry in the growing archive she now suspected, correctly, would someday matter far beyond Ashwood's own borders, that she was recording something rarer and more fragile than mere survival.

Every town around us that we have word of, she wrote, *has chosen one extreme or the other — total closure, hoarding its own safety behind locked gates and leveled rifles, or total collapse, overrun from within by exactly the kind of desperation it refused to prepare for. Ashwood has chosen, at real and ongoing cost, to try to hold the harder, narrower road between those two failures. I do not know yet whether that choice will ultimately save us or cost us everything. I know only that it is, so far, the truest thing I have watched this town do since the night the lights went out, and that if history ever remembers Ashwood, Ohio for anything beyond its survival, I believe it should remember it for this.*

She closed her notebook as the last of the evening light faded over the fairground, smoke still hanging faint and low against the western horizon, and walked home past a checkpoint where Ethan Walker stood his own late shift, greeting a new family — exhausted, hungry, carrying almost nothing beyond each other — with the same careful, deliberate welcome that had, in eight short weeks, become the town's fragile, costly, and altogether necessary answer to a broken and increasingly merciless world.

ASHES OF AMERICA — BOOK ONE AFTER THE VANISHING by Dr. Paul Crawford

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Raiders

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof." — Psalm 46:1–3 (KJV)

I. Iron Ridge

Forty miles east of Ashwood, in the hill country where the flat farmland of central Ohio began to fold itself into the low, wooded ridges that gave the town its name, a man named Marcus Kane had spent the eight weeks since the vanishing building something Ashwood's own leadership had not yet fully understood existed, let alone understood the shape of.

Kane was forty-seven years old, a former National Guard major who had retired two years before the vanishing under circumstances that varied depending on who told the story — some said a disagreement with command over the handling of a domestic deployment, others said simple burnout after two decades of increasingly thankless service, and Kane himself, on the rare occasions he spoke of it at all, said only that he had grown tired, long before the world ended, of watching capable men wait for permission to do what plainly needed doing. He had settled in Iron Ridge, a town a third the size of Ashwood, and had built, in the years before the collapse, a quiet local reputation as a survivalist, a prepper, a man other men in the area's hunting clubs and gun ranges had come to respect for his competence even when they found his intensity somewhat unsettling.

When the vanishing came, and then the fire from the sky two nights later, Marcus Kane had not spent his first hours in grief or confusion the way so much of the rest of the country had. He had spent them executing a plan he had, in some form, been mentally rehearsing for years — securing Iron Ridge's small National Guard armory, where he still maintained enough standing relationships to walk through the door and take command of its contents before any competing claim could be organized against him; consolidating the town's remaining law enforcement and a hard core of like-minded men under his personal authority; and, within the first two weeks, beginning the systematic, efficient absorption of smaller, less organized communities within a widening radius of Iron Ridge's borders.

He did not think of what he was building as villainy. He would have said, and did say, to the men who followed him, that he was simply seeing clearly what Daniel Brooks and men like him refused to see — that a world without functioning law had only ever had one real currency, force, and that communities too sentimental to organize around that fact would not survive the winter, let alone the years of hardship Kane privately believed still lay ahead. Iron Ridge, under his command, had eaten well through its first two months, its people fed, armed, and disciplined — and Kane had funded that success the only way he had found reliably available to him: by identifying which of the smaller, softer communities scattered across the surrounding counties held resources worth taking, and taking them, with the same clinical, professional efficiency he had once brought to military logistics.

Ashwood, by the eighth week, had become impossible for Marcus Kane to ignore. Word had reached Iron Ridge, carried by the same restless network of travelers and traders that carried every other rumor across the broken landscape of northern Ohio, of a town that had organized itself with unusual discipline, that had built working relationships with a growing network of surrounding farms, that had somehow, remarkably, managed to feed and shelter thousands of refugees without collapsing under the weight of it — and Kane, hearing this, had concluded, with the same cold arithmetic that governed every decision he made, that a town with that much organized productivity represented either the greatest threat to Iron Ridge's continued dominance of the region, or the greatest single prize still available to be taken.

He chose, on a warm night in the ninth week after the vanishing, to test which of the two Ashwood actually was.

Kane had built, by that ninth week, something closer to a small standing army than a militia — perhaps ninety armed men under some form of organized command, drawn from Iron Ridge's own population and from the two smaller communities he had already absorbed, drilled on a rotating schedule in the

same National Guard armory yard where he himself had once trained weekend soldiers in a different, more ordered world. He divided his force, by his own private design, into standing security details who never left Iron Ridge's fortified perimeter, and a smaller, more mobile strike element — the men who had hit the Patterson farm — whom he trained personally, and whom he had come, in the privacy of his own mind, to think of the way he had once thought of a Ranger element or a special reaction force: the sharp, disciplined edge of a larger, blunter body.

He did not consider himself a warlord, a term Lydia Hayes would eventually use for him in the pages of her growing history, and would have argued, with the particular cold conviction of a man who had rehearsed his own justification many times over, that he was in fact the only leader in the region taking the actual shape of the collapse seriously. Other towns, in his private assessment, were playing at civilization — rationing systems, watch rotations, refugee camps, the whole delicate architecture Daniel Brooks and men like him were laboring to build — while pretending the old rules of decency and due process still applied to a world that had, in Kane's estimation, shed those rules permanently the instant the first city vanished into fire. He believed, and said often to the men under his command, that history rewarded whoever organized fastest and struck first, and that every week Ashwood spent congratulating itself on its rationing formulas and its refugee screening was a week Iron Ridge spent growing stronger, more disciplined, and more prepared to simply take whatever it eventually decided it needed.

II. The Patterson Farm

Bill and Karen Patterson had farmed four hundred acres two miles east of Ashwood's town line for twenty-six years, land that had passed to Bill from his own father, who had bought it in the years after Korea with a G.I. loan and a stubbornness his son had inherited along with the acreage itself. It was, in the eight weeks since the vanishing, one of the food council's most productive contributing farms — sixty acres of corn nearing harvest, a working dairy herd that had become, in the absence of any other reliable source, one of Ashwood's only remaining suppliers of fresh milk for the town's youngest and most vulnerable residents, and a modest but well-stocked equipment shed that Jack Reynolds had flagged, weeks earlier, as one of the more valuable and least defensible targets in the entire food council's network.

It was the same farm whose fence-line dispute with a neighboring family Jack had noted, with quiet unease, on one of his very first perimeter walks eight weeks earlier — a small, almost forgotten detail that would return, in the days after the attack, to feel far more ominous in hindsight than it had seemed at the time.

The raid began a little after two in the morning, in the deep, moonless dark of a night the raiders had clearly chosen with deliberate care. Bill Patterson woke to the sound of his dogs going suddenly, violently silent — a detail he would describe to Ethan Walker the following day with a controlled, grief-stricken precision that told Ethan, more clearly than almost anything else in the account, exactly what kind of professional force they were now dealing with — and by the time he reached his own bedroom window, his equipment shed was already burning, and armed men in dark, loosely matching tactical gear were moving through his farmyard with a coordinated, wordless efficiency that bore no

resemblance whatsoever to the desperate, chaotic scramble of Curtis Danvers and his two companions eight weeks earlier at the Boyd farm.

There were, by the most reliable later count, no fewer than fourteen raiders involved in the attack — moving in disciplined pairs, covering each other's approaches, working with a fluency that spoke of real training rather than improvised courage. They drove Bill Patterson's own cattle trailer, hot-wired or otherwise made to run despite the pulse, loaded with as many of his dairy herd as they could force aboard in the chaos, and stripped his equipment shed of tools, fuel, and the small emergency generator the food council had helped him install only three weeks earlier. When Bill Patterson, armed with his own deer rifle, attempted to defend his property from the cover of his own front porch, he was shot through the shoulder by a raider positioned, Jack would later determine from the angle of the wound and the recovered shell casing, with the kind of disciplined marksmanship no panicked amateur could have managed in the dark at that range.

Karen Patterson had crawled to her husband across the porch boards while the raid was still underway, pressing both hands hard against the wound in his shoulder, and would tell Ethan later that the strangest and most frightening part of the entire ordeal had not been the gunfire or the flames rising off the equipment shed, but the eerie, disciplined quiet beneath it all — no shouting between the raiders, no chaotic cross-talk, only short, clipped hand signals and low, economical words exchanged between men who had clearly rehearsed this exact sequence of actions more than once before. She had lain on her own porch, her husband's blood soaking through her nightgown, watching armed strangers move through the dairy barn with the calm efficiency of men loading a delivery truck, and had understood, even in the depth of her own terror, that she was witnessing something categorically different from the two frightened, hungry men who had once broken into a neighbor's pantry three streets over in the town's earliest, most chaotic week.

Karen Patterson would tell Ethan, in the shaking, disbelieving account she gave the following morning, that the raiders had said almost nothing to either of them throughout the entire twenty-minute attack — no threats, no demands, no cruelty beyond the cold, businesslike violence of men executing a plan. Only once, as they finished loading the last of the cattle and prepared to withdraw, did one of them, a broad-shouldered man in a dark jacket that Karen would later swear carried some kind of insignia she could not clearly make out in the dark, pause long enough to speak directly to her.

"Tell your mayor," the man said, "that Iron Ridge says hello. Tell him this was a friendly introduction. The next conversation doesn't have to go this way, if he's smart enough to listen."

III. What the Watch Found

The alarm reached Ashwood's watch rotation within minutes of the raid's beginning, carried by a neighboring farmhand who had heard the gunfire and run the half mile to the nearest watch post rather than risk the delay of the radio relay chain, and Jack Reynolds, Ethan Walker, and six volunteers reached the Patterson farm within eleven minutes of the alert — fast by any reasonable standard, and still, as both men understood with a sick, familiar dread the moment they arrived, nowhere close to fast enough.

The equipment shed was fully engulfed by the time they reached the property, throwing enough light across the farmyard that Jack could immediately assess, with the flat, professional clarity of a man reading a battlefield rather than a crime scene, exactly what kind of force had passed through. The tire tracks leading away from the farm were fresh, purposeful, showing no sign of the panicked, erratic driving Jack had come to associate with opportunistic looters. The spent shell casings scattered near the equipment shed were uniform, standard-issue, the kind a organized force carried in bulk rather than the mismatched hunting ammunition individual raiders typically improvised with. And Bill Patterson, bleeding heavily from a shoulder wound that Sarah Collins, arriving twenty minutes later in the hospital's aging ambulance, would work for nearly an hour to stabilize, described, even through his pain and shock, a level of coordination among his attackers that confirmed everything Jack's own reading of the physical evidence had already told him.

"This wasn't hunger," Jack told Ethan quietly, standing over the burned wreckage of the equipment shed as the first gray light of dawn began to filter through the smoke. "Hunger looks like Curtis Danvers, panicked and desperate and shaking so bad he could barely hold his own weapon steady. This was discipline. Fourteen men, moving in coordinated pairs, hitting a target they'd clearly scouted in advance, extracting exactly what they came for and withdrawing before we could organize a response — that's not a mob. That's a unit. And units like that don't form by accident, Ethan. Somebody built that, on purpose, the same way I built our own watch, and whoever that somebody is, they just told us, through a bleeding man on his own front porch, exactly who they are and exactly what they intend to keep doing."

IV. The Name Karen Patterson Gave Them

Daniel Brooks called an emergency council meeting that same morning, the fellowship hall crowded once more with the same tired, weathered faces that had gathered there for every crisis since the vanishing began, and Karen Patterson, her husband stable but sedated in a hospital bed across town, stood before them and repeated, in a voice that shook only slightly, the message the raiders had left her to deliver.

"Iron Ridge," Lydia repeated, writing the name down in the careful, deliberate hand she now reserved for facts she suspected would matter a great deal, for a great many years, to whatever history eventually got written about this terrible season. "Does anyone here actually know that town? I've heard the name in passing from a few of the refugees who came through the checkpoint, but nothing specific."

It was Roger Delacroix — the same long-haul trucker whose account of the initial nuclear strikes had first reached the town square eight weeks earlier, and who had, in the weeks since, settled into Ashwood permanently, finding steady work helping maintain the food council's few remaining working vehicles — who finally answered her, his face grim in the gray morning light filtering through the fellowship hall's windows.

"I hauled freight through that corner of the state for fifteen years," he said. "Iron Ridge was never much of anything before all this — smaller than Ashwood, rougher around the edges, always had a reputation for a certain kind of survivalist crowd out in the hills around it. I've heard talk, since the collapse, from

a couple different travelers who came through the checkpoint over the last month. Word is a former Guard officer named Marcus Kane took the town over inside the first two weeks, armory and all, and has been absorbing every smaller community within reach of it ever since — sometimes by invitation, from towns too weak to feed themselves who figure joining up beats starving alone. Sometimes, if the rumors are even half true, by exactly what happened to Bill and Karen Patterson last night."

Jack absorbed this with the same flat, careful stillness he brought to every piece of tactical information, filing it, Ethan could see, into whatever internal framework he had already begun building since the moment he'd read the tire tracks in the Pattersons' farmyard. "A former Guard major with access to an armory and eight weeks to organize a following," he said. "That's not a rival gang we can wait out, Mayor. That's a small, disciplined army, and it just introduced itself to us on our own doorstep, deliberately, as a message rather than a full-scale attack. Which means whatever comes next, if we don't answer this correctly, is going to be considerably worse than one burned equipment shed and one wounded farmer."

V. What Sarah Fought For

Bill Patterson survived his surgery, though the shoulder wound would leave him, Sarah told the family gently but honestly, with permanently diminished use of his right arm — a hard blow for a working farmer, though considerably better, she reminded Karen, holding both of the woman's hands in her own in the quiet of the hospital's recovery ward, than the alternative that had very nearly claimed him.

"He's going to live," Sarah told her. "He's going to farm again, even if it looks different than it used to. I need you to hold onto that, Karen, because I know right now it feels like everything you built together got taken from you in twenty minutes, and I understand that grief. But he's alive, and that's not nothing. That's not nothing at all."

Karen Patterson wept quietly, gripping Sarah's hands, and after a long moment, asked the question Sarah had come to expect, in the weeks since her own conversion, from nearly every grieving family she now sat with in this exact ward. "Where was God in this, Dr. Collins? We've been going to your Thursday nights. We prayed over this farm every single week since the harvest started coming in. How does He let armed men burn half of what we've built and put a bullet in my husband's shoulder?"

Sarah did not have a tidy answer, and had learned, in the weeks since her own hard-won faith began, not to offer one where none honestly existed. "I don't know all of why, Karen," she said. "I wish I did. I've asked that question about a dying eighty-six-year-old woman and a trampled deacon and a dozen other losses since this all began, and I don't think the honest answer is ever going to be simple enough to fit in a single sentence." She thought of Psalm forty-six, a passage Rebecca had read at the previous week's gathering, and found the words returning to her now with a weight she had not expected. "But I believe He was there. Not stopping the bullet — I can't tell you why He didn't do that, and I won't pretend I understand it. But there, in the ambulance, in the surgery, in the fact that Bill is breathing right now instead of in the ground next to Otis Vance. 'A very present help in trouble.' I've come to believe that promise was never about Him preventing every trouble from ever reaching us. I think it's about Him being present inside the trouble we can't avoid, which is a smaller promise than I once wished it

were, and also, somehow, the only kind of promise that's actually held up, every single time I've watched it tested these last eight weeks."

VI. What Bill Patterson Remembered

Ethan sat with Bill Patterson himself the following afternoon, once the sedation had worn off enough for a proper interview, and found the farmer's account, delivered in a flat, careful voice that Ethan recognized instantly as the particular register of a man holding himself together by sheer will, more useful tactically than anything else the investigation had yet produced.

"They knew the property," Bill said, shifting carefully against his pillows, his bandaged shoulder held rigid against his side. "Not guessed at it, not stumbled onto it in the dark. Knew it. Went straight for the equipment shed and the dairy barn, didn't waste one second checking the house or the machine shop where I keep the stuff that wouldn't have been worth their time. Somebody had eyes on this farm before last night, Ethan. Walked it, or watched it, or talked to somebody who had."

Ethan felt something cold settle in his stomach, the old investigative instinct sharpening despite the exhaustion of the last two days. "Any strangers through here recently? Refugees, traders, anybody asking questions that seemed odd in hindsight?"

Bill was quiet for a moment, thinking. "Had a fella came through about two weeks back, said he was trading tools for grain, spent the better part of an afternoon walking my fence lines with me, real friendly, asked a lot of questions about my equipment, my herd count, whether I was part of the town's food council. I didn't think twice about it at the time — half the county was asking those kinds of questions two weeks ago, trying to figure out who had what to trade. I gave him supper and sent him on his way with a sack of feed corn." His jaw tightened. "I keep thinking now that I fed my own scout a home-cooked meal and never once suspected it."

Ethan relayed the account to Jack within the hour, and Jack absorbed it with the same grim, unsurprised stillness he had absorbed every other piece of the puzzle since the fire first lit up the Patterson farmyard. "That confirms it," Jack said. "This wasn't opportunity. This was reconnaissance, patient and deliberate, weeks in advance. Kane isn't improvising, Ethan. He's running a campaign, the same way I'd have run one, and that means every farm on our perimeter, every checkpoint, every soft spot in this town's defenses has probably already had eyes on it we never noticed, because we weren't yet thinking like people at war."

VII. The Radio Calls

While Jack rebuilt the watch's posture around the new threat, Daniel Brooks spent two long days in Frank Pelletier's basement, working the old ham set through every frequency and contact Frank's careful log had accumulated over eight weeks, reaching out to the handful of neighboring communities that had, by Roger Delacroix's account, not yet fallen under Iron Ridge's shadow.

The responses were not uniformly encouraging. The small town of Millbrook, twelve miles south, answered cautiously, its own mayor plainly wary of entangling his community in a conflict not yet his

own, though he agreed, after a long, careful conversation, to share any intelligence his own scattered contacts picked up regarding Iron Ridge's movements. A farming cooperative near the county's western edge declined outright, its spokesman telling Brooks bluntly over a crackling connection that they had already reached their own quiet accommodation with Kane's people — a tribute arrangement, though he did not use that word — and had no interest in provoking a conflict that had, so far, left them alone.

It was the town of Danforth, eighteen miles north, that gave Brooks the answer he had been hoping for without quite daring to expect it. Danforth's mayor, a blunt, no-nonsense former county commissioner named Sylvia Marchetti, listened to Brooks's account of the Patterson farm attack in near silence, and then answered without hesitation.

"We buried two of our own to raiders out of Iron Ridge's direction back in week six," she said, her voice carrying clearly despite the static. "Smaller operation than what hit you, but same signature — professional, deliberate, in and out before we could organize. I've been waiting for somebody in this county to call me about building something together instead of every town white-knuckling it alone. Yes, Daniel. We're in. Whatever a defense pact between us looks like in practice, we're in."

Brooks came up from Frank Pelletier's basement that evening with the first genuine strategic asset Ashwood had gained since the vanishing began — not an army, not a guarantee, but a partner, and the beginnings of a network that Jack, hearing the news, allowed himself, for the first time since the Patterson farm attack, a rare and cautious flicker of something close to hope.

VIII. The War Council

Jack Reynolds stood before the assembled watch volunteers two days later, in the same gymnasium where he had first briefed thirty-one civilians on the basic disciplines of organized defense nearly six weeks earlier, and found himself delivering a briefing of an entirely different character than anything he had prepared them for before.

"Everything we've built up to this point," he said, "was built to handle desperate individuals and small opportunistic groups. What hit the Patterson farm two nights ago was neither of those things. It was a professional raid, executed by a disciplined force under competent command, and it was, by every indication we have, a deliberate test — a probe, in military terms, meant to gauge our response time, our capabilities, and our resolve before a larger operation. I want to be plain with all of you about what that means. We are no longer simply defending Ashwood against chaos. We are, as of two nights ago, in a contest with an organized rival power that has decided this town is either worth conquering or worth destroying, and I do not yet know which."

He laid out, over the following hour, a complete restructuring of the watch's posture — expanded night patrols along the county's eastern approach, where Iron Ridge's territory lay closest; a new early-warning network built around the same hand-signal and radio relay system that had carried the Patterson farm's alarm, but extended now to cover a far wider radius with dedicated forward observation posts; and, most consequentially, a formal proposal Jack brought to Daniel Brooks the following morning, urging the mayor to reach out, through whatever channels the county's fragile

remaining communication network could offer, to the handful of neighboring towns that had not yet fallen under Iron Ridge's shadow, proposing something between an alliance and a mutual defense pact.

"We cannot out-arm a former National Guard major with access to a state armory," Jack told Brooks bluntly. "Not alone. What we can do is make Ashwood expensive enough, and well-connected enough to its neighbors, that attacking us costs Kane more than he's willing to pay for whatever he thinks he'd gain. That's not a guarantee, Mayor. I want to be honest with you — I don't have a guarantee to offer you at all right now. But it's the best strategic option available to a town our size against a threat this organized."

IX. What Ephesians Taught Jack

It was Walt Henderson, unsurprisingly, who found Jack on his own porch again that same evening, the old farmer settling into his usual chair with the same unhurried patience he had brought to every one of their conversations across the previous eight weeks.

"You look like a man carrying a war on his shoulders, son," Walt said.

"Because I am," Jack said. "I spent eleven years training for exactly this kind of threat, Walt, and I still don't know if it's going to be enough. Fourteen trained men hit an undefended farm in twenty minutes and were gone before we could organize a response eleven minutes out. Kane's got a whole armory behind him and however many more men than fourteen. I keep running the numbers and I don't like where they land."

Walt was quiet for a moment, watching the last light fade over the western fields, and then reached into his jacket pocket and produced, to Jack's mild surprise, his own small, well-worn pocket New Testament — the first time in eight weeks of porch conversations that Walt had actually produced a physical Bible rather than simply quoting from memory.

"Ephesians six," he said, opening it to a page marked with a thin strip of cloth. "'Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.'" He looked up at Jack over the top of his reading glasses. "I'm not telling you Marcus Kane isn't a real, physical threat, Jack. He plainly is, and you're going to need every bit of that tactical mind God gave you to meet him. But Paul wrote those words to a church living under Roman occupation, facing threats a great deal more immediate and physical than most modern readers ever stop to remember. He wasn't telling them to ignore the physical danger. He was telling them there was a deeper battle underneath the visible one, and that the armor for that deeper battle — truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the word of God, and prayer — was the only armor that was ever going to hold up all the way to the end of this thing, whatever the end of this thing eventually turns out to look like."

"I still don't know if I believe all of it the way you do," Jack said quietly, the same honest admission he had offered Walt more than once across the previous eight weeks. "I believe there's something real underneath all this. I've believed that for weeks now. I don't know if I've crossed all the way over into whatever it is Rebecca and Sarah and Ethan have found."

"Nobody's asking you to win the whole war tonight, son," Walt said, the same gentle patience in his voice that had carried Jack through every hard night since the Boyd farm shooting. "Just keep walking toward it. Same as always. And in the meantime, put on whatever armor, physical and otherwise, this town is going to need you to build, because I believe with everything in me that God can use a man who's still walking toward Him just as surely as He uses one who's already arrived."

X. What Rebecca Prayed

The Thursday night gathering that week, now grown well beyond the church's fellowship hall into the main sanctuary itself, opened with a prayer for the Patterson family that Rebecca led standing at the front of a sanctuary fuller than it had been even during the height of the refugee camp's own spiritual awakening — farmers and townspeople and refugee families alike, all of them understanding, in the wake of the attack, that whatever fragile stability Ashwood had built over eight hard weeks now stood genuinely, seriously threatened.

"Second Chronicles, chapter twenty," Rebecca read, her father's Bible open before her, the sanctuary silent and attentive in a way that had become, over eight weeks, a settled and familiar rhythm. "King Jehoshaphat, facing an invading army too large for Judah to defend against on its own strength, gathers the whole nation together to pray, and God answers him through the prophet Jahaziel with words I have been holding onto since I heard what happened at the Patterson farm two nights ago: 'Be not afraid nor dismayed by reason of this great multitude; for the battle is not yours, but God's... Ye shall not need to fight in this battle: set yourselves, stand ye still, and see the salvation of the LORD with you.'" She looked out over the gathered congregation, at faces she had come to know individually across eight remarkable weeks — Sarah, Ethan, Jack sitting near the back with his own uncertain faith still visibly wrestling, the Alvarez family, Ron Higbee, dozens more. "I don't think that verse means we set down every rifle and every watch post Jack has built and simply wait for the sky to open. My father would never have preached that, and I won't either — he taught me that faith and wisdom were never meant to stand opposed to each other. But I think it means something we badly need to hear tonight: that whatever Marcus Kane intends for this town, we do not face it as eighteen thousand frightened people standing entirely alone. We face it as a town that has spent eight weeks learning, the hardest possible way, exactly who does and does not abandon His people in the valley of the shadow."

She led them in prayer for nearly twenty minutes — for Bill and Karen Patterson, for Jack and Ethan and every volunteer who would carry the weight of whatever came next, for wisdom for Daniel Brooks as he reached out to neighboring towns for the alliance Jack had proposed, and, finally, in words that surprised even Rebecca herself as she spoke them, for Marcus Kane and the men following him — a prayer for mercy toward an enemy that Rebecca understood, even as she prayed it, would strike many in that sanctuary as almost unbearably difficult to offer honestly.

"Romans twelve, verse nineteen," she said, closing the prayer. "'Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.' I don't know what that means practically for a town that may have to defend itself with real force in the weeks ahead — I think Jack could tell all of us a great deal more than I can about the hard, physical cost that kind of defense sometimes honestly requires. But I know it means we are not called to carry hatred into whatever comes next, even toward a man who just shot Bill Patterson through the

shoulder and burned half his livelihood to the ground. We can grieve. We can defend our own. We can fight, if fighting becomes the only honest choice left to us, the same way Jack fought at the Boyd farm eight weeks ago — with restraint, with sorrow, never with relish. But we do not have to hate Marcus Kane to stand against him, and I believe, with everything my father ever taught me, that the difference between those two things is going to matter more than any of us can yet fully understand."

XI. What the Scouts Brought Back

Jack sent two of his most trusted volunteers — the retired state trooper and the hunting guide who had joined the watch in its earliest days — on a careful, deliberately cautious reconnaissance mission toward Iron Ridge's territory four days after the attack, under strict instructions to observe only, to make no contact, and to withdraw immediately at the first sign of detection.

What they brought back, two days later, confirmed the worst of Jack's assessment and added dimensions to it he had not fully anticipated. Iron Ridge itself, they reported, had grown substantially since the vanishing — its own population swelled by at least two absorbed neighboring communities, its perimeter marked by fortified checkpoints manned by uniformed, disciplined guards, its central armory visibly active, with regular drilling and patrol rotations that spoke of an organization far more developed than anything Ashwood had managed to build in the same eight weeks. They had counted, from a careful distance, at least sixty armed men moving through the town in organized formations, and had overheard, from a cautious vantage point near what appeared to be a fuel depot, fragments of conversation suggesting Kane's ambitions extended considerably further than simple regional dominance — talk of "consolidating the whole corridor" before winter, of towns that had "seen sense" and joined willingly, and, more troublingly, talk of Ashwood specifically, referred to by one guard as "the soft one that thinks it can hold out."

The hunting guide, a quiet, weathered man named Sal Renner who had spent more nights alone in the surrounding woods than perhaps anyone else in the county, added one further detail that struck Jack as the most useful single piece of intelligence the entire mission had produced. "They've got a supply road running northeast out of town," Renner said, sketching a rough map on the gymnasium floor with a piece of chalk. "Regular truck traffic, twice a day near as we could tell, moving between Iron Ridge and something further out — another town they've absorbed, maybe, or a depot of some kind. That road's their lifeline. It's also their weak point, if it ever comes to that. A force that size needs steady resupply to keep sixty, ninety men fed and armed. Cut that road, and Kane's got a harder problem on his hands than he's used to solving."

Jack absorbed the detail the way he absorbed every piece of tactical information now, filing it away without commitment, the careful discipline of a man unwilling to plan an offensive he had no present intention of launching, but unwilling also to discard a piece of knowledge that might, someday, matter a great deal.

"He's not finished with us," Jack told the council, laying out the scouts' report with the same careful, methodical precision he brought to every piece of tactical information. "The Patterson farm was exactly what I told you it was — a probe, meant to test our response and gauge our resolve. Whatever comes

next is not going to be fourteen men and one burned equipment shed. If Kane decides Ashwood is worth taking rather than worth destroying, we need to be ready for something considerably larger, and we need to be ready for it soon, because I do not believe a man who's absorbed two other towns in eight weeks is inclined to wait very long once he's made up his mind."

Daniel Brooks sat with that assessment for a long moment, the fellowship hall quiet around him, and understood, in a way he had not fully allowed himself to understand even in the raw aftermath of the Patterson farm attack, that Ashwood's next chapter was no longer going to be written primarily against hunger, or disease, or the ordinary chaos of a collapsed nation. It was going to be written, at least in part, against the deliberate will of another human being who had decided, with cold and calculated purpose, that Ashwood's survival and his own ambitions could not both stand.

"Then we get ready," Brooks said finally, his voice carrying the same hard, unyielding resolve it had carried in the days after Otis Vance's death. "Whatever it takes. Whatever it costs. I did not watch this town bury a good man over eighty pounds of grain and build a refuge for three thousand desperate strangers just to hand it over to a man who thinks force is the only law left standing. We get ready, and we pray, and we hold the line Jack's been asking this town to hold since the very first week — because I do not believe, having watched what this town has already survived, that we were brought this far only to be handed over now."

Outside the fellowship hall windows, the September sky hung low and gray over fields of corn standing tall and nearly ready for harvest — a harvest that Ashwood had fought, bled, and buried its own to protect, and that Marcus Kane, forty miles east in a town he had built entirely around the cold, unsentimental logic of strength, had just made unmistakably, dangerously clear he intended to take for his own.

ASHES OF AMERICA — BOOK ONE AFTER THE VANISHING by Dr. Paul Crawford

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Watchmen

"Son of man, speak to the children of thy people, and say unto them, When I bring the sword upon a land, if the people of the land take a man of their coasts, and set him for their watchman: If when he seeth the sword come upon the land, he blow the trumpet, and warn the people... but if the watchman see the sword come, and blow not the trumpet, and the people be not warned... his blood will I require at the watchman's hand." — Ezekiel 33:2–3, 6 (KJV)

I. What the Patterson Farm Taught

In the two weeks following the raid on Bill and Karen Patterson's farm, Jack Reynolds rebuilt Ashwood's defenses from the ground up, working with a focused, unrelenting urgency that left him,

more nights than not, too exhausted to lie awake replaying the memory the way he had after the Boyd farm shooting eight weeks earlier — a small, unlooked-for mercy in the midst of an otherwise grueling stretch of labor.

The watch that emerged from those two weeks bore only a passing resemblance to the loose, well-meaning organization of thirty-one volunteers Jack had briefed in the high school gymnasium two months before. It was, by the time he finished restructuring it, something closer to what he privately thought of, in the language of his old life, as a proper militia — a hundred and forty trained volunteers organized into eight geographic sectors ringing the town, each sector commanded by a captain answerable directly to Jack and, through him, to Ethan Walker's remaining department and to Mayor Brooks; a standing quick-reaction force of twenty of the watch's most capable members, kept on rotating alert status and prepared to reach any point on Ashwood's perimeter within ten minutes rather than the eleven that had cost the Pattersons so dearly; and, running through the entire structure like a spine, an early-warning network built around six newly constructed watchtowers, crude but sturdy wooden platforms raised at the town's most exposed approaches, each manned around the clock in rotating shifts, each connected by radio and by an old-fashioned signal system of bells and lanterns that Jack had insisted on building as a backup, refusing to let the town's entire defense depend on equipment that had already failed it once, in the worst possible way, on the night of the pulse.

"Psalm one hundred twenty-seven," Rebecca had told him, the week the towers went up, standing with him at the base of the tallest one, a repurposed grain silo platform overlooking the eastern approach from Iron Ridge's direction. "'Except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.' My father used to preach that verse to remind people that no amount of human vigilance ever fully replaces the need to actually trust God with the outcome. I've been thinking about it a lot, watching you build all this."

"I've read it a different way this week," Jack said, looking up at the platform against the gray autumn sky. "I keep thinking about the front half of it more than the back half. It doesn't say the watchman shouldn't wake. It says his waking is in vain without the Lord behind it. I've spent two weeks building the best watch this town's ever had, Rebecca, and I still go to sleep every night not entirely sure it's going to be enough. I think that's probably the whole point of the verse. Build it as well as you know how, and then admit, honestly, that building it well was never actually the whole answer."

II. What Was Built

The physical work of fortifying Ashwood consumed nearly every daylight hour that could be spared from the food council's harvest labor, and by the end of the second week, the town's outer edge had begun to take on a shape none of its residents could have imagined two months earlier. The six watchtowers rose first — rough platforms of salvaged lumber and steel, most of them built atop existing structures that already commanded a clear line of sight across the surrounding farmland: the old grain elevator on the town's eastern edge, tallest structure for miles and therefore the obvious anchor point for the sector facing Iron Ridge directly; the water tower on the north side, its faded ASHWOOD lettering visible for miles in every direction, the same tower from which, on an ordinary Tuesday morning two months earlier, a person could once have seen the whole peaceful sweep of the

town spread out below; the bell tower of First Community Church, which Ray Doss offered without hesitation the moment Jack asked, telling him plainly that a church too comfortable to let its own steeple serve the town's actual defense had already missed the point of everything Ray himself had spent nineteen years failing to understand about genuine ministry.

Beneath the towers, teams of volunteers dug and reinforced a shallow perimeter trench along the town's most exposed approaches, backed by earthen berms tall enough to slow a vehicle and provide cover for defenders without turning Ashwood into the kind of visibly militarized fortress Jack was careful, at every stage, to avoid building. "We are not constructing a prison for ourselves," he told the council, when Curtis Boyd raised a concern that the growing fortifications might frighten away exactly the kind of honest refugees the town had spent two months carefully welcoming. "Every checkpoint stays open. Every gate stays manned by people, not just walls. We're building the capacity to stand firm if it comes to that, not building a reason to stop trusting each other before it does."

Lydia Hayes walked the growing perimeter almost daily that October, recording its construction with the same careful attention she had once given to Ashwood's earliest, most desperate weeks, and found herself struck, more than once, by how strange it felt to watch a town she had known her entire life quietly transform itself into something that would not have looked entirely out of place in an illustration from a history book about a much older, harder century. *"We are becoming a walled town,"* she wrote, in the growing archive that would eventually form the spine of her history, *"in the oldest and truest sense of that phrase — not out of love for walls, but out of the same hard necessity that built every walled town in every age before ours. I find myself wondering what Nehemiah must have felt, watching Jerusalem's broken gates rise again under threat of the very enemies who had broken them. I think, perhaps, something very close to what I have watched on the faces of Ashwood's volunteers these last two weeks: not eagerness for the fight to come, but a settled, sober relief that when it does come, it will not find us as unprepared as it found the Pattersons."*

III. The Sector Captains

Jack selected his eight sector captains with the same careful, deliberate judgment he had once applied to choosing team leaders for missions that mattered a great deal more than most of the men he was now training would ever fully understand. Some choices were obvious — the retired state trooper who had helped catch Iron Ridge's scouts at the refugee checkpoint took the eastern sector, closest to Iron Ridge's own territory and therefore the most likely to face renewed attack. Sal Renner, the hunting guide whose reconnaissance had brought back the detail about Kane's supply road, took the northern woods, terrain he knew better than any other living soul in the county.

Other choices surprised the town more, and none more than Jack's decision to give command of the southern sector — Ashwood's most densely populated residential quarter, and therefore, in its own way, one of the most consequential postings in the entire structure — to Denise Marsh, the church nursery director whose daughter Sophie had vanished from a Tuesday night Bible study two months earlier, and who had, in the weeks since Rebecca returned her daughter's small shoes, transformed her grief into a fierce, disciplined determination that Jack had noticed, almost by accident, organizing an informal

neighborhood check-in system among her own street's residents weeks before he ever formally approached her about the role.

"You've never held a weapon in your life, far as I know," Jack told her plainly, the day he offered her the post.

"No," Denise agreed. "But I've organized a hundred church nursery volunteers over eleven years, Jack, which means I know how to build a rotation nobody resents, how to make sure every single family on my street actually gets checked on rather than just the ones who shout the loudest, and how to keep calm when a room full of frightened people needs somebody who isn't frightened standing in front of them. I think that might matter more for this particular job than whether I can hit a target at fifty yards. I'll learn that part. I'm asking you to trust me with the part I already know how to do."

Jack trusted her, and within a month, the southern sector had become, by his own private assessment, one of the tightest and most reliably functioning of all eight — a fact he attributed, when Ethan asked him about it over a late watch shift, less to any tactical genius on his own part than to Denise Marsh's unshakable, hard-won conviction that she had already survived losing the one thing she loved most in this world, and had nothing left to lose that made her afraid of doing this job exactly right.

The remaining captains rounded out a structure Jack had deliberately built to draw on every kind of competence Ashwood still possessed rather than simply defaulting to its most obviously military-minded residents. Curtis Boyd took the western sector, closest to his own farmland, trusted instinctively by the other food council farms who made up much of that sector's population. A quiet, precise former high school shop teacher named Harlan Voss, whose engineering instincts had already proven invaluable in the watchtowers' construction, took the sector covering the hospital and the refugee camp at the fairgrounds, a posting Sarah had specifically requested for him after watching him solve, in a single afternoon, a structural problem with the medical tent's framing that had stumped three other volunteers for a week. And Roger Delacroix, the long-haul trucker whose account of the initial attacks had first reached the town square, took the sector covering the checkpoint and the town's main road approach, his years of reading unfamiliar roads and unfamiliar people across a working lifetime proving, Jack found, unexpectedly well suited to exactly the kind of careful, patient vigilance a checkpoint sector demanded.

Each captain met with Jack weekly, in a standing council that had become, by the second month, nearly as important to Ashwood's functioning as Daniel Brooks's own leadership team — a rotating exchange of intelligence, concerns, and small adjustments that kept the whole structure flexible rather than rigid, responsive to the particular character of each sector's own people and terrain rather than imposed uniformly from above. "A watch built entirely around one man's judgment is a watch that fails the moment that man is wrong, or absent, or dead," Jack told the assembled captains at their very first meeting. "I want every one of you thinking for yourselves, inside the discipline we're building together, not simply waiting on my orders. Ashwood needs eight capable minds watching this town, not one."

IV. Training Day

Every Saturday morning, weather permitting, the entire watch gathered at the high school football field for full training — drills that had, over the two months since the Boyd farm shooting, evolved from Jack's original bare-bones instruction into something approaching genuine military discipline, though Jack was always careful, in every session, to remind his volunteers that discipline and cruelty were not the same thing, and that the goal of every drill was to make each of them steadier and safer, never harder or crueler than the moment actually required.

Sarah Collins ran a full morning of the training schedule herself now, teaching basic trauma care to every volunteer — how to pack a wound, how to apply a tourniquet correctly, how to recognize the early signs of shock — skills she had never expected, in eight years of medical training, to be teaching to farmers and schoolteachers on a football field, and that she had come to regard, in the two months since her own conversion, as a strange and unexpected extension of the same calling that had once drawn her into medicine in the first place. "First Corinthians, chapter twelve," she told the assembled volunteers one crisp October morning, holding up a length of gauze for demonstration. "Paul writes about the body having many parts, each with a different function, none of them less necessary than the others. I used to think that verse was only about spiritual gifts inside a church. I think now it's about exactly this too — a whole town figuring out, together, what part each of us is actually built to play in keeping the others alive."

Frank Pelletier, well into his eighties now and moving more slowly than he had two months earlier, still insisted on personally training every new volunteer on the radio relay protocols that connected the watchtowers to the town's central command post in his own basement, refusing every offer from younger hands to take over the instruction. "A man builds a skill his whole life not knowing why," he told Jack one Saturday, watching a cluster of teenagers practice call-and-response radio discipline under his careful supervision, "and then one day the whole world falls apart around him and it turns out that skill was the exact thing standing between his neighbors and disaster. I don't plan on wasting whatever years the Lord's got left for me sitting idle in that basement when there's still teaching left to do."

One Saturday in late October produced a moment Lydia recorded at length, precisely because it captured, better than any official report could have, exactly what kind of watch Jack was actually building. A sixty-three-year-old widow named Constance Yoder — the same generous soul who had opened her home to the Alvarez family weeks earlier — arrived at training that morning insisting she be taught to shoot, having decided, in her own words, that "an old woman with steady hands and nothing left to lose might as well make herself useful rather than just another mouth this watch has to protect." Jack paired her himself with one of the department's former officers, and within two hours, Constance Yoder was grouping shots on a target with a calm, careful precision that put volunteers half her age to visible shame, prompting a ripple of astonished, admiring laughter across the field that Lydia described, in her account of the day, as "the first sound I have heard from this town in two months that was entirely, uncomplicatedly joyful."

"I raised four children and buried a husband on this same stubbornness," Constance told Jack afterward, handing back the borrowed rifle with the satisfaction of a woman who had just proven a point she'd been waiting weeks to make. "I expect I can learn to defend a fence line same as I learned to do everything else this life required of me."

And Jack himself ran the tactical drills — patrol formations, room-clearing basics adapted for farmhouses and barns rather than the urban environments he had once trained for overseas, the disciplined communication protocols that had made the difference, at the Boyd farm and again at the Patterson farm, between a controlled response and a chaotic one. He found himself, watching a hundred and forty ordinary Ashwood residents drill with growing competence on a football field that had once hosted nothing more consequential than Friday night games, thinking often of a passage Walt Henderson had quoted to him weeks earlier and that he had, without quite admitting it to himself, begun to carry the way he once carried operational checklists: *"Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong."* First Corinthians, sixteen, thirteen. He had looked it up himself, in Walt's own worn Bible, the week after Walt first quoted it to him, and had found himself returning to it, quietly, more often than he expected.

V. Noah's Promotion

It was Noah Simmons who forced Jack to finally revisit the compromise the two of them had struck two months earlier, in the days immediately following the Boyd farm shooting — a compromise that had kept Noah on communications duty, running messages and manning radio posts, while every other volunteer his age or older had, by the tenth week, been folded into the watch's regular armed patrol rotation.

"I turned eighteen last week," Noah told him, standing in the gymnasium after a Saturday training session, the same stubborn set to his jaw Jack remembered from their very first conversation. "I've run communications through two firefights now without freezing once. I've sat with grieving families at that refugee checkpoint more times than I can count. I helped build three of the six watchtowers with my own hands. I'm not asking you to hand me a command, Mr. Reynolds. I'm asking you to stop treating me like the same scared kid who showed up here the week after his parents disappeared."

Jack studied him for a long moment, seeing, he admitted to himself, considerably more than the boy standing in front of him actually realized he was showing — the steadiness that had grown into Noah's bearing over two hard months, the quiet, settled faith that had carried him through losses no eighteen-year-old should ever have had to carry alone, the same disciplined restraint under pressure that Jack valued more than raw aggression in every single volunteer he trained.

"All right," Jack said finally. "You're on regular rotation starting this week. But I want you to hear something first, and I want you to actually hear it, not just nod your way past it the way eighteen-year-olds tend to do." He waited until Noah met his eyes fully. "The night this job gets easy for you is the night you've stopped taking it seriously enough. I've watched good men become careless with the weight of this kind of responsibility, and I've watched what it costs everyone around them when they do. You keep carrying it the way you've carried everything else these last two months — soberly, prayerfully, without ever once treating it like something to be proud of rather than something to be faithful with — and you're going to be exactly the kind of man this watch needs for however long this fight lasts."

Rebecca, hearing the news that evening, thought of the parable Jesus told in Matthew twenty-five, of ten young women waiting through the night for a bridegroom's arrival, five of them wise enough to keep their lamps properly supplied with oil, five of them careless and caught unprepared. "Watch therefore," she read aloud to Noah, the two of them sitting together in the parsonage kitchen where their friendship had first taken root two months earlier, "for ye know neither the day nor the hour." She looked up at him, a young man who had, in the space of a single terrible summer, grown from a frightened, grieving boy into someone the whole town had come to quietly rely on. "I think that's the real inheritance my father left this whole town, Noah, more than any sermon or any recording. Not just watching for danger, though God knows we need people doing that now more than ever. Watching, period. Staying ready. Keeping your lamp full, whatever's coming, whenever it finally arrives."

VI. The Test

The new system faced its first real test on a moonless Wednesday night in the eleventh week, when the watchtower on the eastern grain elevator — manned that night by the retired state trooper and two younger volunteers — spotted movement along the tree line nearly a quarter mile out, three figures moving with the same careful, deliberate patience Jack had trained his own scouts to use.

The trooper did not sound the bell immediately. He had drilled, along with every other tower watchman, on the careful distinction Jack insisted on between a confirmed threat and a possible one, and he used the tower's field glasses — another of Roy Castillo's careful salvage projects, recovered from a collapsed sporting goods store outside town — to observe for nearly ten full minutes before keying his radio.

"Three unknowns, eastern tree line, moving parallel to the perimeter, not approaching directly," he reported, his voice steady over the relay. "Behavior consistent with reconnaissance, not attack. Recommend quiet response, not full alert."

Jack, roused from his own bed by the call, agreed, and moved a six-person quick-reaction team into a concealed position along the watchers' likely route rather than sounding the bell that would have sent the whole town into alert and, more importantly, would have told any watching scouts exactly how seriously Ashwood now took its own perimeter. The three figures, whoever they were, never crossed the tree line, apparently satisfied after nearly forty minutes of careful observation, and withdrew into the darkness the way they had come.

"They were counting towers," Jack told the council the next morning, laying out his own assessment with the same flat precision he brought to every report. "Counting patrol patterns, timing our response. Which means two things worth knowing. First, Kane is still actively assessing us, which tells us he hasn't yet decided whether Ashwood is worth the cost of a full assault. Second, and more important — our tower crew spotted them at a quarter mile, in the dark, without giving away that we'd spotted them at all. Two months ago, we wouldn't have known they were there until they were already inside the fence line. That's the difference all this work has actually bought us."

Daniel Brooks absorbed the report with a complicated mixture of relief and dread — relief that the system had worked exactly as designed, dread at the confirmation that Iron Ridge's attention remained

fixed, patiently and deliberately, on a town it had not yet decided whether to strike or simply continue probing. "How long do you think we have," he asked, "before he stops counting and starts deciding?"

Jack did not offer false comfort. "I don't know, Mayor. I know that every week he keeps watching instead of striking is a week we get to keep building. I intend to make every one of those weeks count for as much as this town can possibly manage."

VII. The Merger

Ethan Walker spent the same two weeks completing a task that had been quietly building since the earliest days of the watch's formation — the formal, official merger of what remained of the Ashwood Police Department into Jack's defense structure, a decision that carried, for Ethan personally, a weight considerably heavier than the simple administrative reorganization it appeared to be on paper.

"I swore an oath twelve years ago to a state and a federal government that no longer functions in any way I can point to," he told Daniel Brooks, the two of them meeting privately in the mayor's office to finalize the arrangement. "I've spent two months telling myself I was still somehow serving that oath, wearing a badge that doesn't answer to anybody anymore. I think it's time I stopped pretending otherwise, and started serving the actual authority this town has organized in its place — which is you, Mayor, and this council, and whatever structure we build together to keep people safe until something better comes back, if it ever does."

Brooks accepted the merger with visible relief, having quietly worried for weeks about the awkward, overlapping authority of two parallel structures that had, so far, cooperated well only because Ethan and Jack happened to trust each other personally rather than because any formal framework required it. The six remaining officers of Ethan's original department were folded directly into Jack's command structure, retaining their badges as a mark of continuity but operating, from that point forward, under the same sector system and the same chain of command as every other watch volunteer.

Brooks held a formal ceremony the following Sunday, after the church service, standing before a crowd that had grown, in ten weeks, to include nearly every resident of Ashwood and a substantial portion of the refugees who had settled permanently within its borders — swearing in the entire hundred and forty-person watch under a single unified oath, administered with a solemnity Brooks had clearly thought carefully about in advance.

"Romans, chapter thirteen," Rebecca read, standing beside Brooks at his request, her father's Bible open in her hands. "'For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil... he is the minister of God to thee for good.' I want every one of you standing here today to understand what you are actually swearing to be, not just what you're swearing to do. You are not becoming this town's terror. You are becoming its minister — its servant, armed and trained, yes, but bound first and always to the good of the people you are protecting, not to your own power over them." She looked out over a hundred and forty faces, farmers and teachers and a handful of teenagers barely old enough to carry the weapons now issued to them, Noah Simmons standing near the front among them. "My father used to say that authority without conscience becomes tyranny. I believe every person standing in this field today has

already proven, through two months of hard, costly, faithful service, exactly the kind of conscience this town needs behind whatever authority we're formally giving you today."

VIII. What Jack Finally Said

It was that same Sunday evening, sitting once more on Walt Henderson's porch as the last light faded over the western fields, that Jack Reynolds finally said the words he had been circling, in his own careful, guarded way, for nearly ten weeks.

"I keep thinking about that Ezekiel passage," Jack said, without preamble, watching the sky deepen toward night. "The watchman who sees the sword coming and doesn't blow the trumpet. God holds that watchman responsible for the blood of the people he failed to warn. I've built the best physical watch I know how to build, Walt. Towers, sectors, radio relays, a hundred and forty trained volunteers. And I keep thinking — what good is all of that, if I'm the kind of watchman who's spent ten weeks warning this whole town about Marcus Kane and never once warned myself honestly about the sword I've been standing in front of my entire life?"

Walt was quiet, letting the question sit in the cooling evening air the way he had learned, across ten weeks of careful, patient conversation, was usually the wisest response to offer Jack Reynolds.

"I've watched Rebecca cross over," Jack continued. "Sarah. Ethan, right in front of me, at that kitchen table. I've read the same verses you've quoted me for ten weeks now, and I haven't found a single flaw in any of them, not one, no matter how hard I've looked, and Walt, I have looked. I think I've been afraid of what it costs to actually say it out loud. Afraid it means admitting that village overseas, and those two men I lost, and every hard decision I've carried alone for a decade, was something I needed forgiveness for rather than something I could just keep managing on my own strength forever."

"That's the truest thing you've said to me in ten weeks, son," Walt said quietly. "And I think you already know the answer waiting on the other side of finally saying it."

Jack sat with that for a long moment, the last light draining from the sky, and then, in the same flat, disciplined voice he used to brief his volunteers, though it shook, just slightly, at the edges, he said the words.

"God, I don't have anything left to offer You that I haven't already tried to carry on my own for eleven years. I believe Jesus died and rose again. I believe He's the only one who was ever actually going to be strong enough to carry what I've been carrying alone. I'm asking You to save me — not because I've earned it, because I know by now I haven't, but because I'm finally out of any other option I trust."

Walt reached over and gripped Jack's shoulder, the same gesture Jack had once offered a wounded Curtis Danvers in the dirt at the Boyd farm, and neither man said anything further for a long while, the two of them simply sitting together in the deepening dark, watching the first stars emerge over a town that had, in that same quiet moment, gained something considerably more valuable than another well-trained watchman.

IX. The Bell

The final piece of Jack's defense structure went into place the following week — a large iron bell, salvaged from a collapsed rural church twenty miles south and hauled back to Ashwood on Curtis Boyd's wagon, mounted at the center of town square beside the old Civil War cannon, wired into the radio relay system so that any watchtower detecting a genuine threat could trigger it within seconds, sending its deep, carrying toll rolling out across every street in Ashwood.

Daniel Brooks stood beneath it the morning of its installation, looking up at the bell's dark iron shape against the gray autumn sky, and thought of the second chapter of Second Timothy, a passage he had heard Rebecca read at more than one Thursday gathering in recent weeks. *"Watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry."* He was no evangelist, Brooks would have been the first to say so — a hardware store owner turned reluctant mayor, doing the best he knew how with a job he'd never wanted and couldn't now imagine setting down. But he understood, standing beneath a bell that would, in the months ahead, ring out more than once across a town still bracing for Marcus Kane's next move, that watching — faithfully, patiently, without ever fully knowing when the sword Ezekiel had warned of might actually arrive — had become the defining discipline of every single person left standing in Ashwood, Ohio, whether they carried a rifle, a stethoscope, a Bible, or simply the quiet, unglamorous responsibility of checking on a neighbor's welfare each morning.

"We are as ready as ten weeks and a hundred and forty faithful volunteers can make us," Jack told the council that evening, delivering his final report on the completed defense structure. "I won't pretend that's the same as being fully ready for whatever Kane eventually decides to send against us. But I will say this, and I believe it with everything I've got: this town is not the same soft target it was the night those fourteen men hit the Patterson farm. Whoever comes against Ashwood next is going to find watchmen on every tower, trained hands on every weapon, and a whole community that has finally, fully learned what it means to actually watch for one another — not just with rifles, but with everything else this town has learned to carry since the day the sky first went dark."

Rebecca stood beside her father's grave that same evening, on her way home from the town square, and found herself thinking not of fear but of something closer to a strange, hard-won gratitude — for a hundred and forty faithful watchmen, for a bell that would ring out warning rather than mourning, for a town that had somehow transformed two months of grief and hunger and loss into the kind of disciplined, prayerful readiness her father had spent thirty-one years preaching that every believer, in every age, was ultimately called to hold. *"Mark thirteen,"* she said quietly, to the quiet stone marker that stood, empty of any body but full, still, of everything her father had ever meant to her. *"'Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh... lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch.'"* She thought her father would have understood, better than almost anyone else in Ashwood's long history, exactly what kind of watching this town had finally, fully learned to do — not merely scanning a dark tree line for the shape of an enemy, though it had certainly learned to do that too, but the older, deeper watchfulness he had spent his whole ministry trying to instill: eyes open, lamps trimmed, hearts ready, for whatever hour, however unannounced, finally arrived.

Above them, the bell hung silent in the gathering evening, waiting, the way every watchman in Ashwood was now waiting, for whatever the coming winter would finally bring.

Part Four — Faith in the Fire

ASHES OF AMERICA — BOOK ONE AFTER THE VANISHING by Dr. Paul Crawford

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Shepherd's Voice

"I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep... My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." — John 10:11, 27 (KJV)

"He being dead yet speaketh." — Hebrews 11:4 (KJV)

I. What Frank Pelletier Built

It was Frank Pelletier, in the eleventh week after the vanishing, who first proposed the idea that would carry Caleb Whitfield's voice further than the pastor himself, in thirty-one years of faithful ministry, had ever managed to carry it on his own.

"I've been sitting on this old rig for two months now, mostly passing messages back and forth about grain shipments and watch schedules," Frank told Rebecca, standing in his cluttered basement amid the tube radios and coiled wire that had become, since the vanishing, the closest thing Ashwood possessed to a nervous system. "But a ham signal doesn't just reach the next town over, dear. On a clear night, with the right atmospheric conditions, this old set of mine can carry a voice a good deal further than any of us have really tested yet. I got to thinking — your father recorded all those sermons for people to watch on a little screen. Seems to me a voice like his was always better suited to traveling further than that."

What emerged from that conversation, over the following weeks, was a modest but remarkable operation: every Sunday evening, and again on Thursday nights after the Remnant's own gathering concluded, Frank patched a small microphone into his transmitter, and Rebecca read, live, in her own voice at first and increasingly in excerpts of her father's recorded sermons played directly into the microphone, out across whatever portion of the shortwave spectrum his aging equipment could reach — a broadcast with no official name, no license, no permission from any authority that no longer existed to grant one, carrying a dead pastor's thirty-one years of ministry out across a broken landscape that had never needed to hear it more badly.

They had no way, in those early weeks, of knowing whether anyone was actually listening. Frank's own log recorded only static and silence in response, night after night, and Rebecca more than once found herself wondering, standing before the small microphone with her father's worn sermon notes in hand, whether she was speaking into nothing more than the empty air itself.

She was not.

II. The Letter from Millbrook

The first confirmation reached Ashwood in the thirteenth week, carried by one of the traders who moved, with increasing regularity now, along the fragile network of roads connecting the handful of communities that had managed to organize themselves in the collapse's aftermath — a folded, hand-written letter addressed simply to "the woman on the radio, Ashwood, Ohio," delivered into Rebecca's hands by a trader who admitted he had no idea what it contained, only that a family in Millbrook had pressed it on him with unusual urgency.

My name is Grace Halloway, the letter read, in a careful, deliberate hand that Rebecca would read so many times over the following weeks that she came to know it almost as well as her own. *I am forty-one years old, and until six weeks ago I would have told you I did not believe in God, or at least that I had stopped believing sometime after my divorce made me decide the universe wasn't the kind of place that looked after anyone in particular. I found your broadcast by accident, scanning an old radio my late father left me, on a Thursday night I remember specifically because it was the worst night of my life since the vanishing — I had just buried my youngest brother, killed by raiders on the road outside our town, and I did not want to keep living in a world that could take him from me on top of everything else it had already taken.*

I heard a man's recorded voice reading from the book of John, chapter eleven — the story of Lazarus, of Jesus weeping at his friend's tomb even knowing He was about to raise him. I had never once, in forty-one years, heard anyone suggest that God Himself might have wept over exactly the kind of loss I was drowning in that night. I listened to the whole broadcast sitting on my brother's grave with that little radio in my lap, and when the woman's voice came back on at the end and said that whosoever called on the name of the Lord would be saved, I called, right there, alone, in the dark, with dirt still under my fingernails from digging my own brother's grave that afternoon.

I do not know your name, or your father's name, though I understood from what you said that the voice belongs to someone who is no longer with you either. I only wanted you to know that his sermon, and your faithfulness in sharing it, reached one more grieving woman than either of you will probably ever know about, forty miles from wherever you are broadcasting, on the worst night of her life. Thank you. I am not the same woman who buried her brother six weeks ago, and I do not think I ever will be again.

Rebecca read the letter aloud to the small circle gathered at the parsonage that Thursday night — Sarah, Ethan, Jack, Noah, Dana, a dozen others now who had become, over three months, something closer to family than mere congregation — and found her own voice breaking on the final lines, understanding, in a way that no amount of watching her father's videos alone at the parsonage table had ever quite

delivered, exactly what Hebrews eleven, verse four had actually meant when it said of righteous Abel, murdered millennia earlier, that he, "being dead, yet speaketh."

"He's still preaching," she said quietly, when she could speak again. "Forty miles away, to a woman he never met, who never once sat in his church. I keep thinking I inherited a box of recordings, Sarah. I didn't. I inherited a voice that apparently isn't finished yet, and I don't think it's mine to keep quiet, even when I'm tired, even when some nights I'd rather just grieve him privately instead of sharing him with the whole broken world."

III. What the Refuge Heard

The broadcast's reach grew steadily through the autumn, carried further by word of mouth among the traders and travelers who now moved regularly between the handful of organized communities scattered across the region, and its most immediate and visible impact, closer to home, unfolded at the fairground Refuge, where Rebecca's welcome station recordings had already begun their quiet work weeks earlier among refugees who had lost everything and arrived with nothing left to lose by listening.

Everett Simms, the grieving father Noah had sat with at the checkpoint weeks earlier, mourning a son who had mocked church as a crutch before vanishing with half his graduating class, came to Rebecca in the thirteenth week having listened, he told her, to every single recording on the drive she'd left at the camp's welcome station, several of them a dozen times over.

"I keep hearing him talk about the prodigal son," Everett said, sitting across from Rebecca at the welcome station table, his voice thick with an emotion he had clearly been holding at arm's length for weeks. "Luke fifteen. The father running out to meet his boy while he's still a long way off, not waiting for an apology first, not making him earn his way back. I spent my whole life telling my son church was for people who needed a crutch, and I think what I actually meant, underneath all that, was that I was too proud to admit I needed one myself. I don't want to keep being the version of myself that boy grew up watching, Rebecca. I want to be the kind of father who runs. Even though he's gone. Even though I can't undo one single conversation I wish I'd had with him differently. I want God to know I finally understand what he was trying to tell me, even if it took losing him to hear it."

He prayed that afternoon at the welcome station table, the first of what would become, by the end of that month, nearly two hundred documented professions of faith among the Refuge's population alone — refugees from Cleveland and Columbus and a dozen smaller towns in between, people who had walked away from destroyed cities carrying nothing but grief and exhaustion, and who found, arriving at a small Ohio fairground, a dead pastor's recorded voice waiting to meet them exactly where they stood.

Carmen Alvarez, whose own faith had carried her family the full seventy miles from Cleveland's ruins, began organizing informal Spanish-language listening sessions for the growing number of Latino refugees passing through the camp, translating Rebecca's father's sermons in real time with a fluency and a passion that Rebecca came to depend on as much as she depended on any single volunteer in the entire operation. "Romans ten, verse seventeen," Carmen told her, the week she started the translated

sessions. "'So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.' I don't think Paul meant that verse only for people who happen to already speak the right language, Rebecca. I think it means exactly what it says. Faith comes by hearing. My job is just making sure more people get to actually hear it."

Sofia and Mateo, Carmen's nine-year-old twins, brought their own small but remarkable contribution to the growing movement, organizing a children's listening circle among the Refuge's youngest residents, retelling their father's simplified versions of the recorded sermons to other children too young to sit through a full message but not too young, Carmen insisted, to understand the heart of what mattered most. Sarah found herself, more than once, standing at the edge of that circle during a quiet moment between medical rounds, watching a cluster of traumatized children — some of whom had watched their own parents vanish, others who had lost them to violence or disease in the collapse's brutal early weeks — sing a simple, halting version of "Jesus Loves Me" in two languages at once, and found the sight, every single time, more moving than she had words to properly explain even to herself.

IV. The Man Who Wouldn't Come

Not everyone in Ashwood found the growing revival a source of comfort, and Grant Sowell, who had taught high school science alongside Rebecca for six years before the vanishing and had lost his wife and both children in the same instant, made his objections known publicly enough that Rebecca could not simply pretend they did not exist.

He found her in the school's abandoned faculty lounge, still occasionally used for food council meetings, on an afternoon in the third week of the broadcast's growing popularity, and did not soften his opening. "I've lost more than most people in this town, Rebecca, and I have watched you build an entire ministry out of grief just like mine, and I think it's the single most understandable and most dishonest thing I have ever watched a grieving person do."

Rebecca did not answer defensively, sitting down across from him instead, giving him the same patient space she had learned, over three months of countless difficult conversations, to give anyone carrying pain this raw. "Tell me what you mean by dishonest," she said.

"I mean that hundreds of thousands of children vanished in a single afternoon, and instead of asking what kind of God allows that, this whole town has decided the correct response is gratitude and baptism," Sowell said, his voice tight with a grief he had clearly never once let himself fully express. "My daughter was seven years old, Rebecca. She liked dinosaurs and hated peas and was afraid of the dark, and she is gone, and no recorded sermon has yet explained to me why a God supposedly powerful enough to remove millions of people in an instant couldn't be bothered to leave me my seven-year-old daughter along with them."

Rebecca was quiet for a long moment, unwilling to offer him a tidy answer she did not actually possess. "I don't know why He didn't take her too, Grant," she said finally. "I've sat with that exact question more nights than I can count, watching families torn exactly in half the way yours was. I don't have a clean answer for you, and I think anyone who offers you one is probably lying to make themselves feel better rather than actually helping you." She paused. "But I'll tell you what I do believe,

for whatever it's worth to you right now, which might be nothing. I believe the same God who took your children in an instant is the only one who can actually meet you in the specific, particular grief of missing them. Not explain it away. Meet you in it. My father used to say that faith was never a replacement for grief — it was the only thing sturdy enough to carry grief without being destroyed by it. I'm not asking you to believe anything today, Grant. I'm just asking you to know that this door stays open, whenever you're ready, if you're ever ready, and that nobody in this church is going to rush you toward gratitude you haven't actually found yet."

Grant Sowell did not come to the Thursday gatherings that autumn, and Rebecca did not press him. But he came, twice, to sit alone in the back pew during Sunday's recorded broadcast, saying nothing to anyone, leaving before the service properly ended — small, cautious steps that Rebecca noted in her own private journal without comment, understanding, from her own three-year journey, that some doors take considerably longer to open than others, and that faithfulness sometimes looked like nothing more dramatic than simply leaving the door unlocked and waiting.

V. What Rebecca Carried

The weight of what she had become, by the thirteenth week, sometimes settled on Rebecca Whitfield in the middle of an ordinary afternoon with a suddenness that left her, more than once, sitting alone in her father's church office with her head in her hands, overwhelmed by a responsibility she had never once asked for and could not now imagine setting down.

She had become, without any formal ordination, without a single day of seminary training, without ever once standing behind her father's actual pulpit in the way he had stood behind it for thirty-one years, something the town had begun, quietly and without much discussion, to simply call her: pastor. Not officially. Not with any of the formal trappings her father would have insisted mattered a great deal. But functionally, undeniably, in every way that counted to the hundreds of people now depending on her each week — for the Thursday gatherings, for the Sunday recordings, for the broadcast, for the endless, exhausting stream of grieving families who came to her office seeking counsel she often felt entirely unqualified to give.

"I don't know what I'm doing," she confessed to Sarah one evening, the two of them sitting in the church office long after the last visitor had gone home, Rebecca's head bowed over a stack of letters that had begun arriving weekly now from towns she had never visited, asking questions she did not always know how to answer. "I'm twenty-seven years old. Three months ago I didn't believe any of this myself. Now people are walking miles to hear recordings I didn't even make, and writing to me like I have some kind of authority I never actually earned, and some mornings I wake up terrified I'm going to say the wrong thing to the wrong grieving person and it's going to cost them something I can't ever give back."

Sarah was quiet for a moment, considering her answer with the same careful deliberation she brought to every difficult diagnosis. "John, chapter twenty-one," she said finally. "After the resurrection, at the Sea of Galilee. Jesus doesn't ask Peter if he's qualified. He doesn't ask him if he went to seminary, or if he's certain he'll never fail again — Peter had just denied Him three times, Rebecca, spectacularly,

publicly, in the worst possible moment to fail. He just asks him, three times, 'Lovest thou me?' And each time Peter says yes, Jesus tells him the same thing: 'Feed my sheep.' I don't think the qualification was ever supposed to be expertise. I think it was always supposed to be love, and a willingness to keep showing up even when you're not sure you're doing it right." She reached across the desk and took Rebecca's hand. "You are feeding an awful lot of sheep right now, with nothing but your father's recordings and your own honest, searching heart. I don't think that's a small thing. I think that might be exactly the qualification God was actually looking for."

Rebecca began, in the weeks that followed, a project that would occupy her every spare hour for the rest of that difficult autumn: transcribing her father's sermons by hand, word for word, onto whatever paper the town's dwindling supplies could spare, building a written archive that could be copied and carried to communities without working electronics or radio equipment of their own — a slow, painstaking labor that connected her, she told Noah one evening, watching him help her collate a fresh stack of pages, to her father in a way even the recordings themselves had not quite managed. "I hear his voice differently writing it out by hand," she said. "Slower. I catch things I missed the first ten times I listened. I think maybe that's part of the gift too — not just that his voice keeps preaching, but that carrying it forward this carefully is teaching me things about him, and about what he actually believed, that I never once bothered to learn while he was still here to teach me directly."

VI. The Baptisms

On the first Sunday of November, with the harvest safely in and the corn cribs finally, mercifully full, Rebecca organized what would become one of the most significant single days in Ashwood's entire post-vanishing history — a mass baptism in the same creek behind Ashwood Community Baptist Church where she herself had been baptized at eleven years old, under her own father's hands, in a life that now felt, to nearly everyone gathered at the water's edge that cold, bright morning, impossibly distant.

Close to sixty people stood in line along the creek bank waiting their turn, wrapped in blankets against the November chill, and Rebecca, standing in water that came nearly to her waist, found herself calling out name after name across three remarkable hours: Sarah Collins, who went under the water with the same careful, deliberate composure she brought to everything, and came up laughing and crying in the same breath. Dana Pruitt, weeping before she even reached the water, thinking, she told Rebecca afterward, of her uncle Harold's own quiet, private surrender three days before the vanishing took him home. Ethan Walker, holding Emily's Bible against his chest even as he waded into the cold water, unwilling, even for this, to set it down. Jack Reynolds, whose baptism drew a small, unplanned round of applause from the gathered crowd, Walt Henderson standing at the water's edge with tears openly running down his weathered face, watching a man he had spent three months quietly discipling finally, fully cross over in the most visible way the faith allowed.

Noah Simmons went under holding the small worn New Testament Gabriel Stone had given him five months earlier, refusing, despite Rebecca's gentle suggestion that he might want to leave it safely on the bank, to be separated from it even for the water. Curtis Boyd. Ron and Doreen Higbee. Denise Marsh, who wept as she came up out of the water, telling Rebecca through her tears that she felt, for the first

time since Sophie's disappearance, that she had finally walked all the way through the grief rather than simply carrying it. Ray Doss himself stood in the water that day, baptized by Rebecca at his own quiet, humbled insistence, a pastor of nineteen years finally, publicly declaring the faith he had only genuinely found in the wreckage of realizing he had never truly possessed it before.

Everett Simms was there too, and Grace Halloway, who had walked the forty miles from Millbrook the week before specifically to be present, telling Rebecca she could not imagine crossing into this new life anywhere except the very creek where the voice that had reached her in the dark finally had a face and a name to go with it. Folake Osei went under holding baby Isabel against her shoulder, refusing, like Noah, to be parted even briefly from what mattered most to her, and came up laughing through tears at the infant's indignant, startled cry, a sound the whole gathered crowd greeted with warm, relieved laughter of their own — the first truly light moment many of them had shared together since the harvest work began. Sylvia Marchetti, Danforth's blunt, capable mayor, had ridden down for the occasion at Daniel Brooks's personal invitation, and stood at the water's edge the entire three hours, watching in a silence Lydia noted carefully in her account, though the woman herself declined, that day, to enter the water — a detail Rebecca chose not to press, understanding by then exactly how differently grace tended to arrive in every different heart it eventually reached.

Jack's own baptism drew the loudest response of the entire morning, not merely for Walt Henderson's open tears but for the sight of nearly the entire watch — off-duty sector captains, volunteers still in their patrol jackets, even a few of Ethan's former officers — gathered along the bank in a show of quiet, unplanned solidarity for the man who had spent three months teaching half of them how to defend a town he had, that same morning, finally and fully surrendered to a King he trusted more than any tactical plan he had ever drawn up in his life.

"Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God," Rebecca read aloud, from Colossians two, to the assembled crowd before the baptisms began, her voice carrying clearly across the creek in the crisp November air. *"Romans six is even plainer about it — 'Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.'"* She looked out over sixty faces waiting in line, farmers and refugees and townspeople who had, three months earlier, belonged to a hundred different private griefs and were standing here now, together, at the edge of the same cold, ordinary Ohio creek her own father had once used to welcome her into exactly this same family. "This water isn't magic," she said. "It doesn't wash away what any of us have lost, or what this town has survived, or what's probably still coming for us before this is finally over. But it is a picture, the truest one I know, of something that already happened the moment each of you actually believed — the old life, buried, and something entirely new, rising up out of the water in its place. My father baptized me in this exact creek sixteen years ago. I didn't understand, that day, what I was actually being given. I understand it now. I pray every single one of you will understand it too, long after today, long after whatever winter this town still has to walk through together."

VII. What Daniel Brooks Feared

Not every resident of Ashwood watched the growing revival with unqualified enthusiasm, and it was Daniel Brooks, sitting with Rebecca in his office two days after the mass baptism, who finally gave voice to a concern he had been quietly turning over for weeks.

"I want to be careful how I say this," he began, "because I have watched what's happening in this town with more gratitude than I probably know how to properly express. I believe it's kept us together through things that could easily have torn a lesser town apart. But I'm the mayor of a town that includes people who don't believe what you believe, Rebecca, and didn't believe it before the vanishing, and haven't come around to believing it now, whatever their reasons. I've had two separate families come to me this week concerned that the town's official structures — the food council, the watch — are starting to feel, to them, like they favor believers over everyone else. I don't think that's actually true, not in any formal sense. But I need you to hear that the concern exists, because a town that starts feeling like it has two classes of citizen is a town that's building a fracture it may not be able to afford, not with Marcus Kane still watching us from forty miles east."

Rebecca absorbed this with more grace than defensiveness, understanding, even as the words stung, that Brooks was raising exactly the kind of concern her father would have wanted her to take seriously rather than dismiss. "I don't want to build a town with two classes of citizen either, Daniel," she said. "My father used to say the gospel spreads by invitation, never by pressure — that the moment faith starts feeling coerced, even subtly, even through something as simple as who gets the best assignments on the food council, it stops being faith at all and starts being something closer to control. I'll talk to Jack and to Curtis about the assignments. I'll make sure nobody administering this town's practical structures is treating belief as a qualification for anything but leadership in the church itself." She paused. "But I won't stop broadcasting, Daniel. I won't stop sharing my father's recordings, or baptizing anyone who asks me to, or being honest about what I believe when someone asks me honestly. I think there's a difference between building an inclusive town and pretending the most important thing that's happened to this community in three months isn't actually happening. I'm willing to work hard at the first one. I don't think I can, in good conscience, do the second."

Brooks studied her for a long moment, and something in his tired, careful face eased, just slightly. "That's all I was actually asking for," he said. "I don't want you to stop, Rebecca. I've watched what this has done for people I love in this town — for Jack, for Ethan, for people I never expected to see change the way they've changed. I just needed to know you were thinking as carefully about the town's whole fabric as you're thinking about its soul. I think you are. I think your father would be proud of exactly how carefully you're carrying both."

VIII. What the Voice Still Said

On the last Sunday of that remarkable month, Rebecca stood once more before the microphone in Frank Pelletier's cluttered basement, her father's sermon notes spread before her, and read, into the crackling static of a shortwave frequency that had, by now, carried his voice to towns whose names she would never fully know, the final section of the very first recording he had ever made after the vanishing — the one she had watched alone, in his darkened study, on the worst night of her life, and had not fully understood, that night, would become the seed of everything that followed.

"The Lord is coming back," her father's recorded voice said, filling the small basement and carrying out, invisibly, across hundreds of miles of broken, grieving American darkness. *"Maybe not today. Maybe not this year. But He is coming, and when He comes, there will be no time to decide what you believe. The decision has to be made before. So today — hear me — today is the day of salvation."*

Rebecca switched off the recording, leaned toward the microphone, and added, in her own voice, the words that had become, over three remarkable months, her own settled and certain testimony.

"My name is Rebecca Whitfield," she said. "That voice you just heard belonged to my father, Pastor Caleb Whitfield of Ashwood, Ohio, who disappeared in the vanishing three months ago, along with everyone else who had already said yes to exactly what he just told you. I mocked him for three years before I finally understood he was telling me the truth. I don't know who's listening tonight, or how far this signal is actually carrying, or what you've already lost to get to whatever radio you're sitting beside right now. But I know my father spent thirty-one years telling anyone who would listen that it was not too late, right up until the moment it very nearly was too late for people like me. If you're hearing this voice tonight, it isn't too late for you either. Whosoever will, the Scripture says. Not whosoever has it figured out. Not whosoever never doubted. Whosoever. That includes you, whoever you are, wherever this signal has managed to find you tonight."

Frank Pelletier switched off the transmitter a few minutes later, the small basement falling quiet, and looked at Rebecca with the particular satisfaction of a man who had spent fifty years building a hobby the whole world had once called useless, and had lived, improbably, to watch it become one of the most important instruments left standing in a broken nation.

"Your father used to tell me, back before all this," Frank said, "that he sometimes wondered if thirty-one years in one small Ohio church meant his life's work would never reach very far beyond it. I wish I could tell him what I've watched these last few months, dear. I don't believe there's a single soul in this whole broken country who's ever preached further than Caleb Whitfield has managed to preach since the night he disappeared."

Rebecca climbed the basement stairs afterward into a cold, clear November night, the same smoke haze that had hung over Ashwood for months finally, gradually beginning to thin along the northern horizon, and stood for a long while in Frank's front yard looking up at a sky more full of stars than she had ever once noticed it holding before the vanishing took away every competing light. She thought of the letter from Grace Halloway, still folded in her coat pocket where she had carried it every day since it arrived. She thought of Everett Simms running, at last, toward the same grace his son had never lived to see him embrace. She thought of Grant Sowell, sitting silent and unconvinced in the back pew, the door still open, still waiting, however long it took him to walk through it.

Her father had preached in one small building, to one small congregation, for thirty-one quiet, faithful years, never once imagining that his final and most far-reaching sermon would be delivered from a hospital chair with a stranger's hand in his, or that his voice would go on afterward, carried on borrowed radio waves into towns and living rooms and grief-stricken bedsides he would never in life have had any way of visiting himself. She did not know, standing beneath that cold November sky, how much further the signal would eventually reach, or how many more Grace Halloways were out there right now, alone with an old radio and a grief too large to carry, waiting for a voice they did not yet

know they needed to hear. She knew only that she intended to keep the transmitter running for as long as Frank Pelletier's failing equipment and her own failing strength allowed, because a shepherd's voice, she had come to believe with everything in her, was never meant to fall silent simply because the shepherd himself was no longer standing in the room.

ASHES OF AMERICA — BOOK ONE AFTER THE VANISHING by Dr. Paul Crawford

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Remnant

"If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up." — Daniel 3:17–18 (KJV)

I. What Came from Cedar Hollow

The woman arrived at Ashwood's checkpoint on a gray afternoon in mid-November, three weeks after the mass baptism, thinner and more hollow-eyed than most of the refugees who had come before her, and told Ethan Walker, once Sarah had gotten enough food and water into her to steady her voice, a story that changed the shape of everything the Remnant believed it understood about its own safety.

Her name was Miriam Castellano, and she had fled a small town called Cedar Hollow, twenty-two miles northeast of Iron Ridge, one of the second wave of communities Marcus Kane's forces had absorbed in the tenth week after the vanishing — not through the kind of brutal, open raid that had struck the Patterson farm, but through a quieter, more calculated process Kane had apparently refined since his first probing attacks: an offer of protection and food in exchange for submission to his authority, extended to towns too weak or too frightened to refuse.

"It wasn't terrible, not at first," Miriam told the small circle gathered in Rebecca's church office that evening — Rebecca, Jack, Ethan, Daniel Brooks, and Lydia, taking careful notes. "Kane's people fed us. Protected us from the raiders that had already hit us twice before he arrived. For about three weeks, honestly, it felt like relief." Her hands, wrapped around a cup of Sarah's precious remaining tea, trembled slightly. "Then his people started asking questions. Who was still holding church services. Who was gathering in homes to pray. They said it wasn't forbidden, exactly — Kane was always careful about the word he used, my pastor told me, always called it a 'security concern' rather than a prohibition. Too many gatherings outside his direct oversight, he said. Too many loyalties competing with the loyalty the town owed him for its survival. He required all religious meetings to register, to report attendance, to submit their teaching for review before it was shared publicly."

"And if a church refused to register?" Jack asked quietly.

Miriam was silent for a long moment. "My pastor refused. Said Acts five was plain enough — we ought to obey God rather than men. Kane's people came for him two nights later. Not violently, not that anyone saw. They just took him for questioning, and he never came back, and nobody in Cedar Hollow was foolish enough after that to ask too many questions about where he'd actually gone." She looked around the small circle of faces, several of them, Rebecca understood, the very people whose recorded broadcasts had reached refugees like Miriam across the whole broken region. "I left three days later. I'd heard about Ashwood on an old radio, the same broadcast half of Cedar Hollow used to gather around in secret after Kane's people started watching our church too closely. I walked two days to get here because I heard this was a town where a person could still worship without asking anybody's permission first."

The room was quiet for a long moment after she finished, the weight of what she had described settling over each of them differently — Jack running the tactical and strategic implications with his usual disciplined focus, Rebecca feeling something colder and more personal settle into her chest, understanding, for the first time with real, concrete specificity, exactly what kind of danger her own very public, very well-known ministry might eventually represent if Ashwood's fortunes ever turned the way Cedar Hollow's had.

Lydia asked the question no one else in the room had quite been willing to ask directly. "Did your pastor know it was coming? Was there any warning at all, before they took him?"

Miriam considered the question for a long moment, turning her teacup slowly between her hands. "He knew the risk the moment Kane's people started asking about registration," she said. "He told us, the last Sunday he preached, that he'd rather lose his freedom than sign his church's teaching over to a man's approval before it reached a single hungry soul who needed to hear it plain and unfiltered. He preached from Daniel that morning — chapter six, the part where Daniel keeps praying with his window open toward Jerusalem even after the king's decree makes it a crime punishable by lions. My pastor said something I've thought about every single day since. He said a faith that only survives when it's convenient was never actually faith to begin with, just habit wearing faith's clothing, and that God had never once promised His people safety, only His presence, and that the second one had always been the only promise that actually mattered in the end." She set down the teacup, her hands finally steady. "I think about him every day. I don't know if he's alive in some cell somewhere, or if Kane's people did worse than questioning to him in the end. I only know he was more certain of what he believed the last time I saw him than I have ever seen any person certain of anything in my whole life, and that certainty is the reason I kept walking those two days instead of turning back the first time I got tired or scared."

II. What the Council Decided

Daniel Brooks called the council together again that same week, the fellowship hall crowded with a familiar collection of faces that had, over four months, become the closest thing Ashwood possessed to a functioning government — and the conversation that followed was, in its own quieter way, as consequential as anything the council had decided since the very first meeting after the vanishing.

"I don't want to overreact to one account from one town," Brooks began, "but I also don't want to be the leader who dismissed a clear warning because it hadn't happened to us yet. Miriam Castellano's story tells us something important about how Marcus Kane thinks, and I believe we would be foolish not to plan accordingly."

"He sees organized faith as a rival power structure," Jack said, laying out the assessment he had already turned over carefully in his own mind since the interview. "That's not an unusual instinct for a man building the kind of authority Kane's building. A congregation that answers first to God, and only secondarily to whatever earthly authority happens to be in charge, is a congregation that can never be fully controlled — and Kane, from everything we've learned about him, is building an operation entirely around control. If Ashwood ever fell under his influence, by conquest or by the kind of quiet absorption that took Cedar Hollow, the very things that have made this town's revival so remarkable — the public broadcasts, the mass baptisms, Rebecca's visibility as a leader hundreds of people now recognize by name — would become, overnight, exactly the kind of target Kane's people went looking for in Cedar Hollow."

Rebecca absorbed this with a steadiness that surprised even herself, though her hands, folded in her lap, gripped tightly enough that her knuckles had gone pale. "I'm not going to stop the public ministry," she said. "I want to be clear about that before we go any further. My father spent thirty-one years teaching me that faith proclaimed in secret out of fear stops being the same faith he gave his whole life to. I won't dishonor that by going quiet the moment the wind shifts even slightly."

"Nobody's asking you to go quiet, Rebecca," Ethan said gently. "I think what Jack's actually describing is something different — building resilience underneath the public ministry, not instead of it. A church that can survive going underground if it ever has to, without losing what makes it what it is."

Jack nodded. "That's exactly it. Ashwood's public witness stays exactly as public and exactly as bold as it's been. But underneath that, we build something Kane's people would have a much harder time finding and dismantling if it ever came to that — smaller, trusted circles, meeting in places that aren't the church, aren't announced on any broadcast, aren't easily traced back to any single address. Call it insurance. I've spent four months building this town's physical defenses on the assumption that the worst might actually happen. I think it's past time we started building the same kind of resilience into the thing this town has decided matters even more than its own survival."

III. The Covenant

It was Rebecca who proposed, in the days that followed, that the core group — the original circle that had gathered at her father's kitchen table five months earlier, now grown to include Jack, Dana, Curtis Boyd, the Alvarez family, Denise Marsh, and a dozen others who had become, through five months of shared grief and shared faith, something closer to family than mere congregation — formally commit themselves to exactly the kind of costly faithfulness Miriam Castellano's account had made suddenly, urgently real.

They gathered on a cold Sunday evening in late November, not in the sanctuary this time but in the same fellowship hall where the Tuesday night Bible study had once been so mysteriously interrupted

five months earlier — a room Rebecca had chosen deliberately, she told them, "because I want us to remember, every time we meet in this exact space, that the people who once sat in these same chairs were faithful enough to be gathered here, doing exactly this, on the very afternoon the Lord returned for them. I can't think of a better room in this whole town to make the kind of promise we're about to make."

She opened her father's Bible to the third chapter of Daniel, and read aloud the account of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego — three young men commanded, on pain of death, to bow before a golden image erected by a king who had already proven, many times over, his willingness to make good on his threats. *"If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up."*

"I want you to notice something about that answer," Rebecca said, looking out over perhaps thirty faces gathered in a circle of lantern light. "They didn't say God would definitely save them. They said He was able to — and then, in the very same breath, they said that even if He didn't, even if the furnace took their lives exactly the way the king intended, they would still refuse to bow. That is the hardest kind of faith there is, and I believe, after what we heard this week from Miriam, that it may be exactly the kind of faith this town is eventually going to be asked to have."

She read next from Revelation, chapter two, verse ten — a promise, she reminded them, written to a church already enduring real persecution, not a hypothetical one. *"Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer... be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."* And from Second Timothy, chapter one, verse seven, a verse Ethan had brought to her attention earlier that week, reading it to her from Emily's own Bible with a steadiness that told Rebecca exactly how far his own faith had traveled in five short months: *"For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind."*

One by one, around the circle, each member of the gathered group spoke a simple, unrehearsed vow — not a formal creed, not words Rebecca had written out in advance for them to recite, but each person's own honest commitment, spoken in their own voice, to remain faithful to what they had found, regardless of whatever cost the coming months or years might eventually demand of them.

"I buried a husband before any of this started," Denise Marsh said, when her turn came, her voice steady despite the weight of everything she had already survived. "I buried a daughter I never even got to bury properly, because there was nothing left of her to bury at all, only her shoes. I am not afraid of losing anything else Marcus Kane could possibly threaten to take from me. I've already survived losing what mattered most. Whatever comes, I'm staying faithful."

Sarah spoke next, her physician's precision giving way, for once, to something plainer and more personal. "I spent twenty-nine years building my whole identity around what I could prove," she said. "I've spent the last five months learning that some of the truest things in this world were never going to show up on a chart or a lab result. I watched a man's clothes fall empty on an operating room floor, and I have never once, since that day, been able to go back to who I was before it happened. I'm not going back now either, whatever it costs. I'd rather lose everything I've built in medicine than lose what I found in that same loss."

Dana Pruitt, sitting beside her, spoke through tears she made no effort to hide. "My uncle Harold waited seventy-nine years to finally say yes to God, three days before he ran out of time to ever say anything else again," she said. "I am not going to spend whatever years I have left being any less certain than a dying old man managed to be in the very last week of his life. Whatever this costs me, it can't cost more than what it would have cost Uncle Harold to keep saying no."

Curtis Boyd, when his turn came, spoke with the same blunt, unadorned honesty he brought to every council meeting. "I've got a farm, a wife, and more debt to this town's survival than I ever expected to owe anybody," he said. "I don't know how to be eloquent about faith, never have. I just know I read Second Corinthians nine about the cheerful giver back in the hungriest week this town ever survived, and it hasn't let go of me since, and I don't intend to let go of it either, no matter what Marcus Kane or anybody else eventually decides to threaten me with over it."

Ethan spoke near the end, Emily's Bible open in his lap the way it so often was now. "I used to think bravery meant not being afraid," he said quietly. "I've learned something different these last five months. Bravery is being afraid of exactly what Miriam described tonight, and choosing faithfulness anyway. Emily prayed for me every day for nine years without ever once making me feel small for taking so long to listen. I owe it to her, and I owe it to whatever's coming, to make sure the faith she planted doesn't get uprooted the first time somebody threatens to make it costly."

Jack spoke last, his voice carrying the same flat, disciplined steadiness he brought to every briefing, though something in it, that night, carried further than mere discipline. "I spent eleven years learning how to protect people with weapons and tactics and careful planning," he said. "I've spent the last five months learning that none of that was ever actually going to be enough on its own. I don't know what Marcus Kane is eventually going to ask of this town, or of this church specifically. I know that whatever it is, I intend to still be standing on this side of it when it's over — not because I'm not afraid, because I am, more afraid than I've let most of you see. But because I finally believe, the way Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego believed, that the furnace was never actually the worst thing that could happen to a man. Bowing to it would have been."

IV. What Jack Built

Jack applied to the church's resilience the same careful, methodical discipline he had applied to Ashwood's physical defenses four months earlier, though the project required a different kind of thinking entirely than watchtowers and sector rotations — a discipline built around concealment and redundancy rather than visible strength, around trust networks rather than chains of command.

He identified, over the following two weeks, six separate locations scattered across the county capable of hosting a meeting of twenty to thirty people without drawing attention — Curtis Boyd's root cellar, reinforced and expanded with the same careful engineering Harlan Voss had brought to the watchtowers; a hidden clearing deep in Sal Renner's woods that Renner himself had used for exactly this kind of concealment his entire hunting career; the collapsed rural church twenty miles south whose salvaged bell now hung in Ashwood's town square, its ruined sanctuary still sound enough, Jack

determined on a careful scouting visit, to shelter a small gathering unnoticed by anyone not already aware it existed.

He built, alongside the physical locations, a careful system of coded signals — specific phrases woven into ordinary conversation, specific arrangements of lantern light in a particular window, a rotating schedule known only to a small, trusted circle of coordinators — designed to allow the Remnant's core membership to gather safely even in a scenario where Ashwood's public structures had fallen entirely under hostile control. He trained the group, gently but seriously, in the same basic security discipline he had once trained his watch volunteers in: how to notice if they were being followed, how to avoid discussing meeting locations over any channel that might be monitored, how to vet new members carefully without becoming so suspicious of every newcomer that the group's own compassion — the very thing that had made it what it was — became a casualty of its own caution.

"First Peter, chapter three," Jack told the assembled group, during one of the resilience training sessions that had become, alongside prayer and Bible study, a regular part of the Remnant's ongoing life together. "'Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.' I used to read that verse as being only about how to argue theology politely. I've come to believe it's also about exactly this — being ready, prepared, thoughtful about how and when and to whom we share what we believe, without ever once losing the meekness Peter specifically commands alongside the readiness. We are not building a bunker mentality here. We are building wisdom. There's a real difference, and I intend for this group to hold onto that difference no matter how hard the coming months eventually push us toward fear instead."

V. What Lydia Recorded

Lydia Hayes spent the better part of a week that November researching, in the small collection of surviving books she had managed to gather from Ashwood's half-looted library, the history of the early church under Roman persecution — a subject she confessed to Rebecca she had never once found personally interesting before this year, and now could not stop reading about, late into the night by lantern light, searching for whatever wisdom the past might offer a town bracing for a future none of them wanted to fully imagine.

"They met in catacombs," she told Rebecca, spreading a handful of salvaged pages across the church office desk one evening. "Underground burial tunnels outside Rome, of all places — worshiping literally among their own dead, because it was one of the only spaces a hostile empire wouldn't think to search first. They developed their own signs, their own passwords, a fish symbol simple enough to scratch into stone with a single motion and innocent enough that a stranger would never suspect what it actually meant. And they kept meeting. For nearly three centuries, through waves of persecution that made whatever we're bracing for look almost gentle by comparison, they kept meeting, kept baptizing, kept passing the faith to their children, until an empire that had once fed believers to lions eventually knelt down and called itself Christian." She looked up at Rebecca, her reporter's careful skepticism softened, these days, into something closer to reverence. "I keep thinking Jack isn't inventing anything new with his root cellars and his hidden clearings. I think he's rediscovering something the church has

always known how to do, whenever it's actually needed to survive. I find that strangely comforting, Rebecca, in a season where comfort is in short supply."

Rebecca thought of her father's own sermon notes, the careful cross-references he had kept for thirty-one years, and found, paging through them that same evening, a passage from Hebrews eleven she had somehow never focused on closely before — not the more famous verses about Abraham and Moses, but the later, harder verses describing believers who "had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment... of whom the world was not worthy." She read the passage aloud to Lydia, and the two of them sat together for a long while afterward in comfortable, sober silence, understanding that whatever the coming months eventually demanded of Ashwood's small, determined Remnant, they would not be the first believers in history to be asked to pay a costly price for exactly the kind of faith they had found — and that the record of every believer who had gone before them, all the way back to a set of catacombs outside a hostile empire's capital, still stood as proof that the cost, however real, had never once managed to be the final word.

VI. What Grant Sowell Watched

Grant Sowell, still sitting alone in the back pew during the public Sunday broadcasts, still unconvinced by anything Rebecca had said to him in the faculty lounge weeks earlier, found himself drawn, almost against his own will, into the edges of the Remnant's resilience planning — not as a believer, not yet, but as a man whose scientific training made him, Jack discovered almost by accident, remarkably useful at identifying flaws in the group's security planning that no one else had thought to consider.

"Your signal system has a pattern vulnerability," Grant told Jack bluntly, after sitting silently through one of the training sessions he had wandered into more out of curiosity than commitment. "You're rotating the lantern signals on a seven-day cycle. Anybody with basic pattern recognition — and I promise you, somebody in Kane's organization has that kind of mind, because every organization does — is going to notice a seven-day repeat inside of a month or two of watching."

Jack studied him for a long moment, surprised and genuinely grateful in equal measure. "You're not wrong," he said. "What would you do differently?"

Grant, despite himself, spent the next hour helping Jack rebuild the rotation around a considerably more resistant pattern, and left that evening having contributed, however reluctantly, to the physical safety of a faith community he still could not bring himself to fully join.

"I don't believe what you all believe," he told Rebecca afterward, finding her in the church office as he so often did now, drawn back again and again despite himself. "I want to be honest about that every single time, so you're never confused about where I actually stand. But I watched Jack Reynolds build something tonight out of genuine care for people he'd die to protect, and I keep noticing that the same care runs through everything this whole group does — the way you all talk about each other, the way Denise Marsh stood up and offered her own grief as an anchor for everyone else's fear, the way not one person in that room tonight seemed the least bit interested in hating Marcus Kane even while planning carefully for exactly what he might eventually do to them." He shook his head slowly. "I don't have a category for that kind of care that doesn't eventually lead back to the thing you keep telling me is

actually underneath it. I'm not there yet, Rebecca. I want you to know I'm getting closer to admitting I might never find a better explanation than the one you've been offering me for two months."

He came back the following week, and the week after that, sitting each time a little closer to the front of the sanctuary than the week before, and though he would not make his own public profession of faith until deep into that hard winter, Rebecca noted in her private journal, the night after their conversation about the lantern rotation, that she had stopped thinking of Grant Sowell as a skeptic observing the Remnant from its edges, and started thinking of him, quietly and without saying so aloud to anyone, as a man already standing closer to the door than he himself had yet found the courage to admit. She thought of the parable of the sower, a passage her father had preached more than once — seed falling on rocky ground, on thorny ground, on good soil finally prepared to receive it — and understood that Grant's grief, however sharp-edged and however honestly angry it remained, had never once been rocky or thorny ground at all. It had simply needed more time than most to be turned and softened, the particular patient labor of watching people love each other faithfully, week after week, until the evidence of that love became harder for his careful, scientific mind to explain away than the explanation Rebecca had been quietly offering him from the very first conversation.

VII. The Drill

Jack ran the Remnant's first full resilience drill on the second Saturday of December, without warning the group in advance, the same way he had once tested his watch volunteers under simulated pressure rather than announced schedules — a decision he explained afterward, to a handful of members initially unsettled by the unexpected exercise, as the only honest way to know whether the system they had built would actually function under the specific pressure it was designed for.

He arranged, through Ethan, for a small team of watch volunteers to play the role of a hostile search party, moving through town on a cold, overcast afternoon, ostensibly investigating "unregistered gatherings" — deliberately unsettling language Jack had borrowed directly from Miriam Castellano's account of Cedar Hollow. The signal reached the core group within eleven minutes: a particular arrangement of lanterns in Ron Higbee's front window, a specific phrase — "the weather's turning early this year" — passed quietly between three separate households along the relay chain Jack had built. Within twenty-five minutes, without a single visible sign of alarm to any casual observer on Ashwood's streets, the group that would ordinarily have gathered that evening for Bible study had instead redirected, in small, unremarkable twos and threes, toward Curtis Boyd's reinforced root cellar, arriving by staggered, deliberately unconnected routes.

Jack met them there afterward, once the exercise concluded, and delivered his assessment with the same careful honesty he brought to every after-action report. "Twenty-five minutes, no visible disruption to anyone watching from outside, every person accounted for," he said. "That's better than I expected on a first attempt, genuinely. But I want you to notice something else too — three of you froze for several seconds when the signal first reached you, unsure whether it was real. That hesitation is human, and I don't fault a single one of you for it. But it's also exactly the kind of hesitation that costs precious seconds in a scenario where seconds are the only currency that actually matters. We're going to keep running this drill, gently, without warning, until the response becomes as natural as

breathing. Not because I think the threat is imminent tonight. Because Matthew twenty-five is plain about the wise virgins keeping their lamps ready long before the bridegroom's actual arrival, and I intend for this group to be found exactly that ready, whenever its own testing finally comes."

Rebecca, watching the drill unfold from Curtis Boyd's cellar doorway, found herself struck less by the tactical precision of it than by the quiet, unhurried calm on the faces gathered around her in the lantern-lit dark — people who, five months earlier, would have been paralyzed by exactly this kind of sudden uncertainty, and who now moved through it with a settled, prayerful steadiness that she understood, watching them, was itself one of the clearest evidences of everything God had already done in this small, unlikely congregation.

VIII. What the Group Became

By the first week of December, the Remnant had become something considerably more structured than the grieving, searching circle that had first gathered around Rebecca's kitchen table in the raw, disoriented days after the vanishing — a covenant community, Rebecca had begun calling it in her own private notes, bound together not merely by shared belief but by a shared, sober commitment to remain faithful to that belief whatever it eventually cost them.

They continued the public ministry exactly as before — the Sunday broadcasts, growing steadily in reach and reported impact each week; the mass gatherings at the church, still drawing hundreds from Ashwood and the surrounding refugee population; Rebecca's careful, ongoing transcription of her father's sermons, now numbering nearly forty complete written copies distributed, by trader and by traveler, to communities across a widening radius of the broken region. But underneath that public witness, the core group now carried something else as well: a quiet, disciplined readiness, built by Jack's careful planning and sealed by the covenant they had spoken aloud in the same fellowship hall where a Tuesday night Bible study had once been interrupted by the return of Jesus Christ Himself.

Miriam Castellano, having found in Ashwood exactly the freedom she had walked two days through hostile territory to reach, joined the Remnant's inner circle within a month of her arrival, her firsthand account of Cedar Hollow's fate becoming, in the weeks that followed, one of the most sobering and most galvanizing testimonies the group ever heard — a living reminder, Rebecca told them more than once, that the freedom to gather, to worship, to speak the name of Jesus Christ openly in a public square, was not a permanent condition any of them had any right to take for granted, however secure Ashwood's own defenses currently felt.

"Joshua, chapter one, verse nine," Rebecca read, closing the group's gathering on the first Sunday of December, snow beginning to fall for the first time since the collapse, settling soft and silent over a town that had survived, against every reasonable expectation, five entire months of catastrophe that would have broken far larger and far better-resourced communities than Ashwood, Ohio had ever claimed to be. *"Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest."*

"I don't know what Marcus Kane is eventually going to decide about this town," she told the gathered circle, snow catching in the lantern light through the fellowship hall's windows. "I don't know if the

freedom we've had to build all of this — the broadcasts, the baptisms, this very room full of people who found Christ in the wreckage of everything else they lost — is going to last another five months, or another five years, or only until whatever winter is still ahead of us finally breaks. But I know this: whatever comes, we have already decided, together, in this exact room, who we intend to be when it arrives. We are the Remnant. Whatever it costs, however dark the furnace eventually gets, we intend to still be found faithful when the fire finally comes."

Miriam Castellano stood near the back of the fellowship hall that evening, watching the snow gather on the windowsill, and found herself, for the first time since she had walked two frightened days out of Cedar Hollow, feeling something she had not expected to feel again so soon: a settled, grateful peace, not because the danger she had fled was any less real, but because she had found, in this small Ohio town, exactly what her own pastor had died, or disappeared, or simply vanished from her life trying to protect — a people who understood, with their eyes fully open, precisely what it might cost to keep gathering, and who had decided, together, in a fellowship hall built on the exact spot where the Rapture had once interrupted an ordinary Tuesday night Bible study, that the cost was one they intended to pay gladly rather than surrender the freedom that had brought each of them, by such different and often devastating roads, to this same room.

Rebecca closed the gathering that night the way she had closed nearly every gathering since her father's letter first found her in his church office five months earlier, with words she had come to think of as less her own than simply borrowed, faithfully, from a man who had spent his whole life preparing exactly this kind of remnant to carry his work forward without him. "My father used to say that the church was never meant to be a building," she told them, "and never meant to be safe, not in the way this world means safety. He said it was meant to be a people, scattered wherever necessary, gathered wherever possible, but never, ever silent. I don't know what Marcus Kane is going to ask of us. I don't know what the coming winter, or the coming year, or whatever comes after that is going to cost this room full of people I have come to love more than I ever expected to love anyone outside my own family. But I know we are still here. I know we are still gathering. And I know, whatever else changes, that this remnant intends to keep doing both, for as long as God gives us breath to do it."

Outside, the first snow of the season kept falling, quiet and steady over watchtowers manned against a threat still gathering forty miles to the east, over a hospital counting its dwindling supplies in careful weeks rather than months, over a food council's silos finally, mercifully full after a hard-won harvest — and over a small, determined circle of believers who had, in the space of five extraordinary months, transformed from a town of strangers into a family bound by something considerably stronger than mere geography, preparing themselves, with sober eyes wide open, for whatever cost their faith might still be asked to pay.

ASHES OF AMERICA — BOOK ONE AFTER THE VANISHING by Dr. Paul Crawford

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Iron Ridge

"When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice: but when the wicked beareth rule, the people mourn." — Proverbs 29:2 (KJV)

"O LORD, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save! ... The law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth." — Habakkuk 1:2, 4 (KJV)

I. The Shape of a Conquest

By the first week of December, five months after the vanishing and nearly three since the raid on the Patterson farm, Marcus Kane controlled, by his own private count, eleven towns and unincorporated communities across a widening territory that reached, at its furthest edge, to within twelve miles of Ashwood's own eastern perimeter.

He had not conquered all eleven the same way, and it was this fact, more than any single tactic, that made him the kind of adversary Jack Reynolds found himself most reluctant to underestimate — a man who understood, with the cold clarity of a career military officer, that force applied everywhere with equal weight was force wasted, and that a conqueror who could offer three distinct paths to submission, each calibrated to the particular character and particular fear of the community facing him, would always absorb more territory, more quickly, and at less cost to himself, than a conqueror who knew only how to burn.

The first path was the one Cedar Hollow had walked, and the one Miriam Castellano's account had made vivid and specific to the council: a quiet, patient offer of protection and provision, extended to communities already frightened and already failing, followed only later, once dependence had taken firm root, by the narrowing restrictions that turned protection into control. Kane called this path, in the private ledger he kept of his own expanding territory, "integration," and he had come to prefer it above every other method, not out of any particular mercy, but because it cost him almost nothing in blood or material and left him, at the end of the process, with a population that had convinced itself, gradually and almost without noticing, that submission had been its own idea all along.

The second path was the one the Pattersons had glimpsed in miniature, the one Kane reserved for communities too organized, too well-defended, or too far along in their own independent survival to be absorbed quietly — a demonstration of overwhelming, disciplined force, applied precisely enough to break the target's confidence without necessarily requiring its complete destruction, followed by an offer of terms that always arrived, deliberately, in the immediate aftermath of maximum fear. A town called Willowbrook, eight miles south of Iron Ridge's original border, had walked this path in full during the ninth week — a coordinated night raid considerably larger than the Patterson farm probe, striking Willowbrook's grain stores, its small municipal armory, and its water treatment facility in a single coordinated operation that left the town's own defenses, such as they were, shattered within twenty minutes. Kane's terms arrived the following morning, delivered by an unarmed emissary under a white flag with the careful, calculated theater of a man who understood exactly how such gestures would be remembered: full integration into Iron Ridge's territory, protection and provision guaranteed,

in exchange for the town's remaining weapons, its complete political submission, and the surrender of its three sitting council members for what Kane's emissary called, without any apparent irony, "a full accounting of the town's prior decision-making."

Willowbrook's council surrendered within the day. Its three council members were never seen publicly again.

The third path, the rarest and the one Kane reserved for communities whose location or resources made outright destruction more costly than value gained, was negotiated tribute — an arrangement, struck with perhaps two of the eleven absorbed communities, in which the town retained a nominal, closely supervised independence in exchange for a fixed and unforgiving share of its harvest, its livestock, and its remaining fuel, delivered on a schedule Kane's people enforced with the same disciplined regularity he brought to every other aspect of his growing operation.

Sylvia Marchetti, relaying what her own network of contacts had pieced together to Daniel Brooks over Frank Pelletier's radio in the second week of December, summarized the pattern with a bluntness Brooks had come to appreciate in her. "He's not building an army to conquer territory for its own sake, Daniel," she said. "He's building a system. Carrot for the weak, the stick for the proud, a leash for whatever's left in between. I've watched men build that kind of thing before, in a different life, in a different country. It works, right up until somebody finally decides it's worth the cost to break it. The trouble is, the longer it works, the higher that cost keeps climbing."

There was a fourth path, rarer still, that Kane's growing territory had produced only twice in five months, and that unsettled Jack Reynolds, when he finally pieced together a full account of it, more than either the quiet absorption of Cedar Hollow or the punitive violence visited on Willowbrook. Two small communities — little more than crossroads settlements, each numbering fewer than three hundred souls — had approached Kane themselves, unprompted, offering their full submission before he had ever moved against them at all, having concluded, watching the fate of their neighbors from a frightened distance, that early surrender purchased better terms than resistance ever could. Kane had received both offers personally, according to Marchetti's sources, and had treated the men who brought them with a courtesy that bordered on genuine respect — elevating both settlements' existing leadership into minor administrative roles within his own growing structure, a small, calculated mercy that cost him nothing and bought him, in return, two more examples he could hold up to every other undecided community as proof that submission, offered early enough and willingly enough, need not always end the way it had ended for Millbrook.

"That's the part that worries me most, strategically," Jack told Ethan privately, turning the intelligence over between them late one night at the watch's command post. "Cruelty's easy to rally people against. Mercy, offered selectively enough to reward exactly the behavior he wants, is a great deal harder to fight, because it doesn't just conquer a town's defenses. It starts to conquer a town's own reasoning about whether resistance was ever worth the cost in the first place."

II. What Happened at Millbrook

It was the fate of Millbrook — the same town from which Grace Halloway had walked forty miles to be baptized in Ashwood's creek — that reached Ashwood's leadership with the most immediate and personal weight, arriving by way of a trader who had passed through the town only three days after Kane's forces completed its absorption.

Millbrook had chosen, unlike Cedar Hollow, unlike Willowbrook, a fourth path that Kane's own careful taxonomy had not fully accounted for: open, organized resistance, mounted by a town whose own modest defenses, inspired in part by reports of what Ashwood had built, had grown considerably more serious in the weeks since Bill Patterson's shoulder wound first became common knowledge across the county. Millbrook's mayor — the same cautious man who had answered Daniel Brooks's earliest outreach with careful, noncommittal interest — had spent two months quietly fortifying his own town's perimeter, training his own volunteers, and had, in the end, refused Kane's initial approach outright.

The battle that followed lasted, according to the trader's account, less than ninety minutes. Millbrook's defenses, serious by the standards of an ordinary town but nowhere near the scale or discipline of the ninety-man force Kane brought against them, were overwhelmed within the first half hour, and what followed, in the trader's careful, halting retelling, was not the swift, businesslike absorption Cedar Hollow had experienced, but something considerably harder — a punitive occupation, deliberately visible, intended, Jack assessed grimly for the council, as much as a message to every other community watching from a cautious distance as it was a conquest of Millbrook itself.

"Twelve dead that we know of," the trader told the council, his voice unsteady with the memory of what he had personally witnessed passing through three days later. "Including two of the town's watch volunteers who'd surrendered their weapons and were shot anyway, in front of the whole square, because Kane's second-in-command said resistance had to carry a cost steep enough that the next town watching wouldn't be tempted to try it themselves."

Rebecca thought immediately, hearing the account, of Grace Halloway — of the letter that had reached her in the thirteenth week, of the woman's own walk to Ashwood's creek only weeks earlier, radiant with a newfound faith Rebecca had watched settle over her like something visibly, physically new. She excused herself from the council meeting long enough to step into the hallway and weep, briefly and privately, before returning, composed, to hear the remainder of the report — understanding, with a clarity that had nothing academic left in it, exactly what kind of enemy Ashwood was truly facing, and exactly how much closer that enemy had just moved.

"Is Grace safe?" she asked, when the trader finished.

"I don't know, ma'am," he admitted. "I know the town's still standing, under Kane's people now. I know there was a church in the square that got hit particularly hard during the fighting — burned partway through, deliberate or not, nobody I spoke to could say for certain. I didn't get close enough to learn individual names."

III. Inside Iron Ridge

What Ashwood's leadership did not yet know, and would not learn in full detail for several more weeks, was the shape of daily life inside Iron Ridge itself — a town that had, under Marcus Kane's five months

of increasingly total authority, become something considerably more complicated than the simple monolith of menace it represented to the communities watching it from a fearful distance.

A young man named Peter Ashby, twenty-two years old, had lived in Iron Ridge his entire life, had watched Kane's rise from an ordinary, well-regarded local prepper into the absolute authority over what had become, in five months, a small regional empire, and had found himself, over that same period, increasingly unable to reconcile the man's genuine, undeniable competence — the food that reliably reached Iron Ridge's own tables, the order that had spared its own streets the chaos consuming so much of the surrounding region — with the accounts he had personally witnessed of exactly what that order cost the communities absorbed into it.

Peter's own father had served, in the town's earlier, more ordinary life, as a deacon at Iron Ridge's small community church, a congregation that had, in the chaotic early days after the vanishing, briefly flourished the same way Ashwood's own church had — until Kane's administration, in the ninth week, issued the same registration requirement Miriam Castellano had described to Ashwood's own council, and Peter's father, faced with the choice of submitting his church's teaching for official review or ceasing to gather at all, had chosen, quietly and without any public confrontation, simply to stop holding services rather than compromise what he still, privately, believed.

"I watched something go out of my father the day he made that decision," Peter would tell Ethan Walker, weeks later, in circumstances neither man could yet have predicted. "Not his faith — I don't think Kane's people ever managed to touch that, not really, whatever else they took from him. But something in how he carried himself in public. He started speaking more carefully. Watching who was listening before he said anything that mattered. I grew up watching my father be the most fearless man I knew, and I watched Marcus Kane's system, patient and bloodless and never once cruel to his face, turn him into a man who checked over his shoulder before he prayed with our family at our own dinner table."

Peter himself had been recruited, at nineteen, into Kane's standing security force — not out of any particular ideological commitment, but because the alternative, in a town where every able-bodied young man was expected to serve in some capacity, offered no meaningful alternative at all. He had trained under Kane's personal supervision, had absorbed, along with genuine tactical skill, a steady diet of the man's own cold philosophy — that mercy was a luxury only the strong could afford to extend, and only ever to the weak who had already fully submitted — and had found himself, by the time of the raid on Millbrook, standing in formation among the men who executed two surrendered watch volunteers in the town square, understanding, even as he stood there, that some irreversible line inside himself had just been crossed that he had spent five months telling himself he would never actually have to cross.

He did not desert that night. He was not yet ready, and the cost of a failed attempt, he understood with total clarity, was not a risk he could take lightly, not with his own father and younger sister still living inside Iron Ridge's tightly controlled perimeter, entirely within Kane's reach. But he began, in the weeks that followed, to notice, with a careful attention he had never before applied to his own daily life, every crack in the system he had once accepted without question — every soldier who flinched at an order, every family whose loyalty seemed more performed than genuine, every rumor of a town like

Ashwood that had somehow managed to build something Kane's cold arithmetic had not yet found a way to fully break.

Life inside Iron Ridge, in those five months, had settled into a rhythm that Peter found, the longer he lived inside it, increasingly difficult to describe honestly to anyone who had not experienced it directly — neither the outright brutality that rumor sometimes painted it as, nor the orderly, grateful security Kane's own propaganda insisted it had become, but something quieter and in some ways more corrosive than either extreme. Food arrived reliably, rationed but sufficient, distributed through a system that functioned, on its own terms, considerably more smoothly than Ashwood's own had functioned in its chaotic first weeks. Children attended a functioning school, staffed by teachers who had, without exception, learned to keep their lesson plans carefully within the bounds Kane's administration found acceptable. Church bells, where they still hung at all, rang only for funerals now, never for worship, a silence Peter had grown up hearing as ordinary and had only recently begun to notice as the specific, deliberate absence it actually was.

What troubled Peter most, turning the system over in his own mind during the long, watchful hours of routine patrol duty, was how reasonable it all felt from the inside — how easy it had been, for five months, to tell himself that the order and the food and the safety were worth whatever quiet compromises they required, right up until the night in Millbrook's town square made the actual cost of that bargain impossible to keep looking past. He thought often, in the weeks before his own escape, of a phrase his father had used only once, in a careful, guarded conversation the two of them had shared shortly after the church stopped meeting — a phrase from the book of Judges that Peter had not understood, at nineteen, and had come to understand with growing clarity as Kane's system consolidated further around him: *"In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes."* His father had said it, Peter now understood, not as praise for the chaos that had followed the vanishing, but as a warning about the opposite danger — that a people frightened enough of chaos would eventually crown almost anyone who promised order, without asking carefully enough what that order actually cost.

IV. Kane's Table

Marcus Kane held court, most evenings, in what had once been Iron Ridge's small municipal building, now converted into something closer to a military headquarters, and it was there, over a modest but reliably stocked evening meal, that he met regularly with the three men who had become, in five months, his closest and most trusted lieutenants — men whose loyalty he had cultivated as carefully and as deliberately as he had cultivated every other asset in his expanding operation.

Colonel Reese Whitmore — the rank was self-appointed, a fact none of the three men around the table were foolish enough to remark upon — had served under Kane in the Guard years earlier and had followed him into this new role with an unquestioning loyalty that Kane valued above almost every other quality he looked for in a subordinate. It had been Whitmore who commanded the raid on the Patterson farm, and Whitmore again who had overseen the punitive occupation of Millbrook, executing each order with a precision that left Kane, privately, more satisfied with the man's usefulness than concerned about the visible cruelty with which he sometimes exceeded his instructions.

"Ashwood," Kane said that evening, spreading a hand-drawn map across the table between them, the same careful attention he had once brought to briefing rooms half a world away now turned entirely inward, toward a corner of Ohio that had, until recently, seemed to him barely worth the trouble of conquering. "Whitmore's scouts confirm what the earlier probe already suggested. Watchtowers on all six approaches now. A trained militia numbering somewhere over a hundred, by our best count, operating under real discipline rather than panic. A functioning food council, a functioning hospital, and — this is the part I find genuinely interesting, gentlemen — a religious movement that has apparently grown large enough to be broadcasting on shortwave radio to half the region."

"You want it destroyed," Whitmore said, more statement than question.

"I want it understood, before I decide what I want," Kane said. "A town that organized this level of discipline in five months, without any of the advantages I had — no armory, no prior military structure to build on, nothing but a hardware store owner and apparently a small circle of ordinary citizens who decided to take their own survival seriously — is either the greatest threat currently operating within a hundred miles of this table, or it represents the single most valuable asset I could possibly absorb, if I manage it correctly rather than simply breaking it the way we broke Millbrook."

The second man at the table, a former county sheriff's deputy named Aldous Krantz who now oversaw Kane's growing network of informants and scouts, offered the assessment Kane had specifically asked him to prepare. "The religious element concerns me more than the militia, sir, if I'm honest," Krantz said. "The militia's dangerous, no question — well-led, by all accounts, a former Ranger running the operation with real professional discipline. But militias can be broken by superior force, given enough time and enough patience. What I've watched happen with towns like Cedar Hollow, and now apparently Willowbrook too, is that the religious element is the one thing that keeps resisting registration and control even after everything else has been broken. It's not tied to a single leader the way a militia is tied to its commander. Kill the man in charge, and it doesn't die with him. It just keeps finding a new voice to carry it forward."

Kane absorbed this in the same cold, methodical silence he brought to every difficult piece of intelligence, and when he finally spoke again, his voice carried the particular certainty of a man who had already, in the privacy of his own calculating mind, begun to settle on his eventual answer.

"Then Ashwood becomes the priority," he said. "Not tomorrow. Not next week. I don't intend to repeat the mistake of moving against a well-defended target before I've fully understood its weaknesses. But we will move against it, gentlemen, before this winter is finished, and when we do, I intend to have already identified exactly how to separate this town from whatever is holding it together so completely — because I have learned, across eleven towns now, that force alone rarely breaks the thing that actually matters. You have to find the seam first, and pull."

V. What Sylvia Marchetti Learned

Danforth's own network of scouts and traders, considerably more developed than Ashwood's own after months of careful cultivation under Sylvia Marchetti's blunt, capable leadership, brought word of Kane's private council meeting to Daniel Brooks within a week — not verbatim, not with the precision

of a direct transcript, but close enough, pieced together from a network of informants scattered across three absorbed communities, that Jack Reynolds found the broad strokes entirely credible.

"He's decided we're the priority," Jack told the council, laying out Marchetti's report with the same grim, professional clarity he brought to every piece of tactical intelligence. "Not immediately — Marchetti's sources suggest he's still gathering information, still probing our defenses the way those three scouts did in October. But the clock is running now in a way it wasn't before. Millbrook resisted and got broken hard, deliberately, as a message to every town watching. We're the only town within a hundred miles that's actually built something Kane apparently considers genuinely dangerous to his whole operation. That's not comfort, and I'm not going to pretend it is. But it does tell us something useful — he's not going to move against us carelessly. He's going to look for a seam first. Which means our best defense right now isn't just strengthening the wall. It's making sure there isn't a seam for him to find."

Daniel Brooks absorbed this with the particular weariness that had settled into him, permanently now, somewhere around the third month of an ordeal that showed no sign of offering him any real rest. "What would a seam even look like, in a town like ours?" he asked.

"Division," Jack said simply. "Grant Sowell's concern, back in the fall, about two classes of citizen — that's exactly the kind of seam Kane's people would look to exploit, if they ever found evidence it was real rather than merely feared. Resentment over rationing. Distrust between the watch and the civilians it protects. Anything that convinces a portion of this town that their own neighbors, not Marcus Kane, are their real problem. I've watched men like Kane exploit exactly that kind of internal fracture before, in places a great deal larger and better-resourced than Ashwood, Ohio. It's cheaper than an army, if you can find it, and considerably harder to defend against, because you can't post a watchtower against your own neighbor's growing bitterness."

Sal Renner had already begun answering that exact concern in his own quiet, methodical way, having spent the better part of December running a second, independent verification of everything Marchetti's network reported, unwilling, as he told Jack plainly, to let Ashwood's entire strategic picture rest on intelligence gathered secondhand through channels the town did not fully control. He and two of his most trusted scouts spent four separate nights that month working the contested territory along Iron Ridge's western edge, using the same careful woodcraft that had once made him the finest hunting guide in the county, confirming troop movements, supply routes, and — in a detail that would prove, weeks later, to matter a great deal more than anyone realized at the time — the exact rotation schedule of the patrol covering the stretch of road nearest Ashwood's own contested boundary.

"They're stretched thinner than Kane probably wants anyone outside his own command structure to know," Renner reported, laying a hand-sketched map beside Peter Ashby's own account for comparison, the two independent pictures aligning with a precision that left Jack more confident in the overall assessment than either source could have earned alone. "A hundred and thirty men sounds like an army until you spread it across eleven towns and a growing perimeter. His actual mobile strike capacity — the force he could bring against us directly, on short notice, without stripping every other holding bare — is closer to sixty, maybe seventy at the outside. That's still more than we'd want to meet

in an open field. But it's not the overwhelming force the raw number makes it sound like, and I think that matters for how we plan."

Jack absorbed the correction with the same disciplined recalibration he brought to every fresh piece of intelligence. "It matters a great deal," he said. "It means time and patience favor us more than I'd initially assumed. Every week Kane spends holding down eleven towns instead of consolidating into a smaller, more defensible core is a week his actual striking power against us stays exactly this size, and every week we spend deepening what we've already built is a week that size becomes less and less sufficient to break us."

Rebecca, sitting quietly through most of the strategic discussion, spoke into the silence that followed with a quiet, settled conviction that carried its own particular weight in a room otherwise dominated by tactical calculation. "Then the answer isn't only better fortification," she said. "It's the same answer it's always been, since the very first week after the vanishing. This town has to actually be what it claims to be — one people, genuinely bound together, not merely coexisting under a shared threat. I don't think that's naive, Daniel. I think Jack just told us, in his own language, exactly what my father would have told us in his: a house divided against itself cannot stand. Matthew twelve, verse twenty-five. If Kane's whole strategy depends on finding a crack in our unity, then the whole town's defense depends, at least in part, on making sure that crack never has the chance to form."

VI. What Peter Ashby Decided

It was in the third week of December, during a routine supply run to one of Iron Ridge's more distant outposts, that Peter Ashby finally made the decision he had been circling, with growing and increasingly unbearable clarity, since the night in Millbrook's town square.

He had been assigned, along with two other young security recruits, to escort a supply convoy along the same eastern road that ran, eventually, toward the loosely contested territory separating Iron Ridge's expanding reach from Ashwood's own perimeter — territory patrolled irregularly by both sides, and known, among Kane's own scouts, as one of the few remaining gaps where a determined man might slip through unnoticed if he chose his moment carefully enough.

Peter chose that moment on the return leg of the convoy, in the deep hour before dawn when his two companions had both, against explicit protocol, allowed themselves to doze in the cab of the truck, exhausted from a long day's work and lulled by the false security of territory Kane's forces had controlled without incident for weeks. He left no note for his father, understanding that any note discovered in the aftermath would place his family in more danger than his silent absence alone was likely to cause — a calculation that cost him, walking away from the only home he had ever known into the frozen dark of a December night, more than he had words to properly measure.

He reached Ashwood's eastern checkpoint a little after dawn, exhausted, half-frozen, and was met, within minutes of his arrival, by Sal Renner's forward observation post — the same careful, disciplined screening process Jack had built months earlier now processing exactly the kind of high-value, high-risk arrival it had been designed to catch.

"I'm not here to hurt anyone," Peter told the watch volunteers who searched and questioned him, his hands raised, his voice shaking with cold and exhaustion in equal measure. "I served under Marcus Kane for three years. I watched what his people did at Millbrook, and I couldn't do it again. I have information about his operations, his numbers, his plans for this town specifically. I'm asking for asylum, and I understand completely if you don't believe a word I'm telling you."

VII. What Peter Brought

Jack Reynolds interviewed Peter Ashby personally, over the course of nearly six hours spread across two full days, with a careful, methodical thoroughness that left nothing to chance — cross-referencing every detail against Sylvia Marchetti's own intelligence network, against the accounts of Miriam Castellano and the Millbrook trader, watching for any inconsistency that might suggest the young man was exactly the kind of infiltrator Ashwood's checkpoint had been built to catch.

He found none. What Peter Ashby brought, instead, over those two exhausting days of careful debriefing, was the single most valuable piece of intelligence Ashwood had received since the vanishing began — a detailed accounting of Kane's force strength, now numbering close to a hundred and thirty trained men across his expanding territory; the location and capacity of his central armory; the internal command structure built around Colonel Whitmore and the two other lieutenants; and, most critically, confirmation of exactly the strategic assessment Jack had already begun to suspect on his own.

"He's not planning a direct assault, not yet," Peter told the small circle gathered in Ethan's office — Jack, Ethan, Daniel Brooks, and, at Peter's own quiet request, Rebecca, whom he had specifically asked to meet after learning, from the watch volunteers who had first questioned him, something of the town's broader story. "He's planning to find your seam first, exactly the way your Mr. Reynolds apparently already guessed. He's got people — not soldiers, just ordinary traders and travelers — moving through communities like yours right now, listening for exactly the kind of internal tension he can eventually use. Resentment. Fear. Anybody with a grudge against the town's leadership who might be persuaded, given the right offer, to open a gate rather than defend it."

"And if he doesn't find a seam?" Jack asked.

Peter was quiet for a moment. "Then I believe he moves against you directly, sometime before spring, with everything he's got. I don't think Marcus Kane is a patient man in the way that word usually means patient, Mr. Reynolds. I think he's a calculating one. He'll wait exactly as long as waiting serves him, and not one day longer."

Rebecca, listening to the account with the same careful attention she had once brought to studying her father's own sermon notes, found herself asking the question that had been building in her since Peter first mentioned his father's church. "You said your father stopped holding services rather than submit to Kane's registration," she said. "Is he still there? Still safe?"

Something in Peter's exhausted face shifted, grief and guilt mingling in equal measure. "As safe as anyone is, under a system like Kane's," he said. "I couldn't bring him with me, Miss Whitfield. Couldn't even warn him I was leaving, not without risking exactly the kind of attention that would have made

things considerably worse for him and my sister both. I think about that every single hour since I crossed into your territory. I left the two people I love most still standing inside the very system I just risked my life to escape."

Rebecca reached across the table and took his hand, the same gesture she had extended to a hundred grieving strangers across five remarkable months. "Then we're going to pray for them," she said simply. "Every single Thursday, by name, for as long as it takes, the same way this whole town has learned to carry each other's grief since the day the world first fell apart. You didn't abandon them, Peter. You made an impossible choice inside an impossible system, and I don't believe for one second that the God who's carried this whole broken town through five months of catastrophe is going to stop watching over your father and sister now, just because the watching happens to be harder to see from where you're currently standing."

Peter Ashby remained in Ashwood through the rest of that winter and long after, earning, within weeks, a quiet trust among the watch that surprised him more than it surprised anyone who had actually witnessed the careful, thorough honesty of his two-day debrief. Jack assigned him, at first, to menial support duty rather than any position of real responsibility, a caution Peter himself understood and did not resent — "I'd have done the same, in your position," he told Jack plainly, the first week — but by the turn of the new year, as his intelligence proved itself accurate again and again against Renner's independent verification, Jack had begun folding him carefully into the watch's own planning, valuing, above all, the young man's rare and specific knowledge of exactly how Kane's mind actually worked from the inside.

He asked Rebecca, in his second week in Ashwood, whether he might attend a Thursday gathering, admitting, with the same careful honesty he brought to every conversation since his arrival, that he did not know what he believed about the things his own father had quietly, faithfully practiced his entire life, but that watching a church stop meeting rather than compromise its convictions, and then watching, only weeks later, an entirely different church three towns away broadcasting those same convictions openly across an entire county, had left him with more questions than he currently had answers for. Rebecca welcomed him without hesitation, and Peter Ashby became, in the weeks that followed, one more quiet addition to a Remnant that had already learned, through five hard months of practice, exactly how to make room at its table for anyone still honestly searching.

VIII. What the Council Decided

Daniel Brooks called the full council together that same week, Peter Ashby's intelligence laid out in careful detail before a room that had, over five months, grown accustomed to absorbing hard news without flinching, and found, even so, that the scale of what Peter's testimony confirmed settled over the gathered leadership with a weight considerably heavier than anything since the night of the Patterson farm raid.

"A hundred and thirty trained men, with a working armory behind them, actively looking for a way to divide us before he ever commits to a direct assault," Brooks summarized, his voice carrying the particular flatness of a man forcing himself to remain steady in the face of numbers that genuinely

frightened him. "Jack, I need your honest assessment. Can we hold against a force that size, if it comes to that?"

Jack considered the question with the same careful, unflinching honesty he had brought to every assessment since the very first week of the watch's formation. "Not in an open engagement, not against a hundred and thirty trained men with an armory's worth of equipment behind them," he said. "But we don't have to win an open engagement, Mayor. We have to make Ashwood expensive enough, and difficult enough, that the cost of taking us exceeds whatever Kane believes he'd gain — and we have to make sure, with everything we've got, that the seam he's looking for simply isn't there to find. That's not purely a tactical problem anymore. Rebecca said it herself, three weeks ago, before we had any of this confirmed. It's a unity problem, and I believe, now more than ever, that it's the single most important defense this town actually has left to build."

Ethan, who had said little through most of the briefing, finally spoke from where he stood near the window, looking out at a town blanketed now in a full month's accumulation of winter snow. "I spent twelve years enforcing the law under a system that assumed good order was the default condition, and disorder was the exception you occasionally had to manage," he said. "I don't think that's true anymore, and I don't think it's going to be true again for a long time, maybe not in my whole lifetime. I think what Marcus Kane actually represents is the honest, ugly truth about what happens when force replaces covenant as the thing holding a community together. And I think the only real answer to that truth, the only one that's ever actually worked across the whole span of human history, is a community bound by something Kane's whole system doesn't have the first idea how to counterfeit — genuine love, genuine sacrifice, genuine faith held in common rather than force held in common. I don't know if that's going to be enough to save us, when it finally comes down to it. I know it's the only thing I actually believe is worth dying to protect."

Curtis Boyd, who had said little through most of the meeting, spoke up from where he sat near the back, his farmer's bluntness cutting through the room's careful strategic language with characteristic directness. "I keep hearing everybody talk about walls and unity like they're two separate projects," he said. "I don't think they are, not really. Every hour my hired hands spend on the food council's rotation instead of resenting it is an hour Kane doesn't get to use against us. Every family that trusts the rationing formula instead of hoarding against their neighbors is one less crack in the foundation. I think what Jack and Rebecca are both describing is really just one thing wearing two different coats — a town that actually believes it's one town, instead of eighteen thousand people who happen to share a zip code."

Sarah, who had been quiet through most of the strategic discussion, added the medical dimension no one else in the room had yet raised. "I want the council to understand something else too," she said. "If this does come to open conflict, however it unfolds, this town's capacity to care for its wounded is going to matter as much as its capacity to defend its perimeter. I've been quietly building a stockpile of what I can spare from ordinary care, setting aside supplies specifically for mass casualty response, training a dozen more volunteers beyond Dana and myself in trauma basics. I don't say that to frighten anyone further. I say it because Jack taught this whole town, months ago, that preparation isn't the same thing as fear. I intend to make sure medicine holds up its own end of that same principle."

The council sat with that assessment for a long moment, snow falling steadily outside the fellowship hall's windows, the same snow that had begun falling the night the Remnant first spoke its covenant aloud three weeks earlier — and Daniel Brooks, looking around the room at faces that had carried this town through five months of catastrophe no one gathered there had ever once asked for, understood, with a clarity that felt less like fear now than a kind of settled, sober resolve, exactly what the coming winter was going to demand of every single one of them.

"Then we keep building both," he said finally. "The walls, and whatever it is that Ethan's actually describing underneath them. Jack, keep training. Rebecca, keep preaching, keep gathering, keep doing exactly what you've been doing since the night your father disappeared. And all of us — every person in this room, and every person we can reach beyond it — we hold this town together, on purpose, every single day between now and whenever Marcus Kane finally decides it's time to test whether we actually meant it."

IX. What Lydia Wrote That Night

Lydia Hayes closed her account of that difficult week with words she would return to often, in the months and years that followed, as the truest summary she ever managed to write of the particular danger Ashwood now faced — a danger that had grown, in the space of a single autumn, from scattered desperation into something with a name, a face, and a calculated, patient will behind it.

Marcus Kane has built, in five months, an instrument of considerable and growing power, she wrote, *and I do not believe this town does itself any favors by underestimating either his competence or his patience. He has broken towns that resisted him outright, absorbed towns that surrendered quietly, and left standing, as a warning to every community still watching, the specific and terrible cost of choosing wrong. I do not know whether Ashwood's own choice — to build both walls and unity, force and faith, in equal and deliberate measure — will prove sufficient against a man who has already conquered eleven communities without once needing to test himself against a town organized quite the way ours has become. I know only that I have watched this town choose, deliberately and at real cost, to become something Marcus Kane's cold arithmetic may not have a category for: not merely strong, and not merely faithful, but both together, refusing, so far, to let either quality be purchased at the expense of the other. Proverbs twenty-nine says the people mourn when the wicked bear rule. I have watched, this autumn, exactly what that mourning looks like in the towns that have already fallen. I pray, with an intensity I did not know I possessed six months ago, that this town's own record, whenever it is finally written, tells a different story entirely.*

Outside, the December snow kept falling over watchtowers manned through the longest, coldest nights the county had seen in years, over a hospital counting its remaining medicine with careful, disciplined precision, over a church whose broadcast now reached, by Frank Pelletier's best estimate, nearly a dozen communities scattered across the wounded landscape of northern Ohio — and over a town that had, in the space of five extraordinary months, become exactly the kind of target Marcus Kane's patient, calculating mind had finally, fully turned its attention toward, forty miles east, in a headquarters lit by stolen fuel, where a former National Guard major sat studying a hand-drawn map of Ashwood's defenses, waiting, with the particular discipline of a man who had never once in his life

rushed a decision he could not afford to make wrong, for the seam he remained entirely convinced he would eventually find.

ASHES OF AMERICA — BOOK ONE AFTER THE VANISHING by Dr. Paul Crawford

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Blood on County Road 17

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." — John 15:13 (KJV)

"The beauty of Israel is slain upon thy high places: how are the mighty fallen!" — 2 Samuel 1:19 (KJV)

I. The Convoy

County Road 17 ran northeast out of Ashwood in a long, unbroken line through open farmland before curving into the low hills that eventually gave way to Danforth's own territory, eighteen miles distant — a route that had become, over the two months since Sylvia Marchetti first answered Daniel Brooks's radio call, the single most important artery connecting Ashwood's alliance with the only other organized community still standing firmly against Marcus Kane's expansion.

Twice each month, a joint convoy moved along that road in both directions, carrying grain and dried goods from Ashwood's hard-won harvest north to Danforth in exchange for the fuel and machine parts Danforth's own small industrial base could still produce, along with intelligence, medical supplies, and, increasingly, the kind of mutual moral support that Daniel Brooks had come to believe mattered nearly as much as the material goods themselves. It was, by the second week of January, a well-established rhythm — six vehicles, a rotating security detail of a dozen watch volunteers under Jack's careful protocols, a route that had run without serious incident for two full months.

Peter Ashby had warned them, in the careful debriefing sessions that continued well into the new year, that established patterns were exactly the kind of vulnerability Marcus Kane's people were trained to identify and exploit. Jack had taken the warning seriously, varying departure times, alternating routes where the terrain allowed, rotating the convoy's security detail so no predictable roster ever repeated twice in a row. It was not enough.

On the morning of January the fourteenth, the convoy left Ashwood at 6:40, twenty minutes earlier than its previous run, carrying eleven watch volunteers under the direct command of Jack Reynolds himself — a decision he had made, in the weeks since Peter Ashby's arrival, to personally lead the convoy security on a rotating basis rather than delegate the responsibility entirely, a choice that would prove, in the hours that followed, to matter a great deal more than he could have known when he made it.

Curtis Danvers rode in the third vehicle, one of eleven volunteers on the rotation that morning — a fact that still struck some in Ashwood as remarkable, five months after Jack had put a controlled, disciplined bullet through his shoulder in Curtis Boyd's own farmyard. Danvers had stayed in Ashwood through the autumn, his own hometown having collapsed entirely in the weeks after his failed raid, and had found, in the town that had shown him mercy rather than the death he had fully expected to receive, something he told Sarah once he had never expected to find again in his lifetime: a second chance he intended to spend the rest of his days honoring rather than wasting. He had brought his wife and two children to Ashwood in October, having finally located them through a trader's careful inquiries, and had joined the watch himself in November, training under Jack with a fierce, disciplined gratitude that had made him, by January, one of the volunteers Jack trusted most completely on any convoy detail.

II. The Ambush

The attack came at 8:15, in the stretch of road where County Road 17 narrowed between a wooded ridge on one side and a steep drainage ditch on the other — terrain that Jack had flagged, months earlier, as the single most dangerous point along the entire route, and had never once been able to fully mitigate, because the road itself offered no viable alternative path through that particular mile of ground.

Colonel Reese Whitmore had chosen the ground with the same careful, professional eye Jack himself would have brought to selecting an ambush site, positioning thirty-six men in concealed firing positions along the wooded ridge two full days before the convoy's altered departure time, patient enough to wait through a full extra day of exposure rather than risk detection by moving into position too close to the actual attack. It was, Jack would understand within the first devastating minute, the largest and most professionally executed assault Ashwood's watch had yet faced — considerably larger than the fourteen men who had hit the Patterson farm, disciplined in a way that made the difference between a fighting chance and a massacre depend entirely on how quickly Jack's own convoy could react to an engagement that had, by design, given them almost no warning at all.

The first shots took out the lead vehicle's engine block and two tires simultaneously, a coordinated volley that stopped the convoy dead in the exact killing zone Whitmore had selected, and in the chaos of the following ninety seconds — vehicles skidding, volunteers diving for whatever cover the roadside ditch offered, the deafening, overlapping crack of gunfire from concealed positions on higher ground — Jack Reynolds fought the hardest and most desperate engagement of his entire life, civilian or military, understanding within the first ten seconds that his eleven-person detail was facing a force more than three times its size, in terrain that offered the attackers every possible advantage.

"Ditch! Get into the ditch, return fire only on confirmed targets, conserve ammunition!" Jack's voice carried across the chaos with the same flat, disciplined clarity that had steadied his volunteers through every crisis since the Boyd farm shooting five months earlier, and it was that discipline, more than any single tactical decision, that kept the ambush from becoming a total, catastrophic loss in its opening minute. The convoy's security detail, trained relentlessly through five months of Jack's uncompromising standards, found the ditch's meager cover within seconds and began returning

organized, controlled fire rather than the panicked, wasted volleys a less-trained group would have loosed in the first terrified moments of contact.

The first sixty seconds felt, to every volunteer who survived them, considerably longer than any clock could have measured. Rounds cracked off the frozen roadbed in tight, deadly patterns, kicking up frozen gravel that stung exposed skin like buckshot of its own. Harlan Voss, the quiet shop teacher who had helped engineer the watchtowers months earlier, found himself dragging a wounded companion by the collar of his jacket into the meager cover of the drainage ditch, his own hands shaking so badly he could barely maintain his grip, discovering, in that terrible minute, a strength he had never once suspected himself capable of. Roger Delacroix, positioned near the rear of the convoy, put three rounds into the tree line with a steadiness that surprised even himself, years of reading unfamiliar roads translating, in the crucible of the ambush, into an unexpected and vital calm under fire.

It was not enough to prevent the cost. A volunteer named Sam Kessler, one of Denise Marsh's southern sector team, took a round through the chest in the ambush's opening seconds and died before Jack could reach him, the first fatality of a morning that would claim, before it finished, more of Ashwood's own than any single day since the vanishing itself.

Curtis Danvers, positioned near the convoy's third vehicle when the ambush opened, saw what Jack himself, pinned down forty yards away, could not immediately see — Whitmore's forward element beginning to flank the convoy's exposed southern edge, moving to cut off the ditch's cover entirely and collapse the entire defensive position from an angle no one had yet organized to defend. He did not wait for orders. He broke from what limited cover he had, laying down suppressing fire that drew Whitmore's flanking element's attention fully onto himself, buying the rest of the convoy's security detail the critical thirty seconds they needed to reposition and meet the new threat properly.

He took two rounds doing it, the second one fatal, and fell in the roadside grass of County Road 17 having bought, with the last thirty seconds of his own life, exactly enough time for eight of his ten remaining companions to survive an ambush that had been designed, with cold professional precision, to leave none of them standing at all.

III. What Held

The engagement lasted eleven minutes in total — eleven minutes that would be reconstructed, in painstaking detail, by Jack himself in the days that followed, and that would come to represent, in Lydia's eventual written account, both the costliest and the most genuinely heroic single episode in Ashwood's entire post-vanishing history.

Whitmore's force, having lost the element of total surprise to the discipline of Jack's returning fire and having failed, thanks to Curtis Danvers's sacrifice, to complete the flanking maneuver that would have ended the engagement decisively in the ambush's opening minute, found itself facing a defense considerably more costly to press than Kane's careful planning had anticipated. Jack, reading the battlefield with the same cold tactical clarity that had once kept far larger units alive in far worse terrain, recognized within the fourth minute that the attacking force's own positioning had left them vulnerable to a specific, narrow counter-assault along the ridge's eastern face — a gap in Whitmore's

coverage that Jack exploited with four of his remaining volunteers in a maneuver so aggressive and so unexpected that it broke, within ninety more seconds, the attacking force's confidence that this particular convoy represented the easy, decisive victory Kane's planning had promised them.

The counter-maneuver itself unfolded in a matter of seconds that felt, to the four volunteers Jack selected for it, like the longest of their lives. Jack led them in a low, disciplined rush along a shallow fold in the ridge's eastern face that Whitmore's positioning had left unwatched, closing the distance to the flanking element before the attackers fully registered the threat materializing on their own exposed side. It was brutal, close-quarters work, over almost as quickly as it began, and it broke something essential in Whitmore's confidence that his own careful planning had accounted for every variable — the sudden, unmistakable realization that the target he had been sent to break had instead found, in the chaos of its own defense, exactly the kind of aggressive resolve that turned a planned massacre into a costly, inconclusive engagement neither side could claim as a clean victory.

Whitmore withdrew his remaining force at 8:26, eleven minutes after the first shot, having lost, by Jack's later count of the abandoned positions, at least six of his own men to the convoy's disciplined return fire — a cost considerably higher than Kane's careful calculations had anticipated, and one that would, in the following weeks, prove to matter a great deal more to Marcus Kane's own strategic patience than anyone in Ashwood yet understood.

Jack knelt over Curtis Danvers's body in the sudden, ringing silence that followed the withdrawal, the same disciplined composure that had carried him through the entire engagement finally, briefly, giving way to something rawer, and found himself, for the first time since his own conversion two months earlier, praying not for strength to continue the fight but for the simple, overwhelming grace to properly honor what had just been given on his behalf.

"Greater love hath no man than this," he said quietly, to no one, to the man himself, to the God he had finally, fully surrendered to on Walt Henderson's porch, *"that a man lay down his life for his friends."*

IV. The Response

Ethan Walker was at the town square command post when the first frantic radio call broke through — Noah Simmons, still manning communications duty on a rotating basis even after his promotion to full patrol status the previous autumn, having drawn the morning's relay shift almost by accident, was the one who actually took the call, his voice cracking as he relayed the words no one on the receiving end wanted to hear: *ambush, County Road 17, multiple casualties, need immediate reinforcement and medical.*

Ethan mobilized the quick-reaction force within ninety seconds, a discipline built directly out of the very drills Jack had run relentlessly through the autumn, and reached the ambush site eleven minutes after Whitmore's withdrawal, arriving to a scene that Noah, who had insisted on riding along despite Ethan's initial reluctance to bring the same young man who had just taken the frantic radio call directly into the wreckage of what it described, would later say he carried with him for the rest of his life — the frozen roadside grass dark with blood, the convoy's lead vehicle riddled and smoking, Jack Reynolds

kneeling in the cold mud beside a body that Noah, drawing closer, recognized with a sick lurch as belonging to a man he had personally trained alongside on a dozen watch rotations.

Noah did not freeze this time, the way he might have five months earlier at the Boyd farm. He moved directly to the wounded, applying the trauma training Sarah had drilled into every volunteer with a steady, focused competence that impressed even Ethan, who had spent twelve years around trained first responders and recognized real composure under pressure when he saw it. He worked beside Harlan Voss to stabilize a volunteer with a shattered forearm, keeping up a low, steady stream of reassurance the entire time, and it was Noah, more than anyone else on the scene that morning, who thought to gather the fallen's personal effects with careful, deliberate reverence before the recovery vehicles arrived — Curtis Danvers's own worn New Testament, still tucked in his jacket pocket, a detail Noah would carry to Melissa Danvers himself, unable to entrust so precious an object to anyone else's hands.

"I keep thinking I should be used to this by now," Noah told Ethan quietly, on the grim ride back into town, the recovered wounded and the covered dead loaded carefully behind them. "It's been almost six months. I've seen so much already."

"I hope to God you never get used to it," Ethan said. "The day this stops costing you something is the day I start worrying about you, Noah. Grief like this is supposed to hurt. It's supposed to feel unbearable every single time. That's not weakness. That's just what it costs to actually love people in a world like the one we're living in now."

V. What Sarah Faced

The radio call reached Ashwood Regional at 8:31, and Sarah Collins, who had spent two months quietly building exactly the mass-casualty response capacity she had promised the council in December, found every piece of that careful preparation tested within minutes of the first wounded arriving.

Eight injured, two fatal, in a convoy detail of eleven — numbers that represented, in raw statistical terms, one of the worst single-incident casualty rates Ashwood Regional had processed since the vanishing itself, and Sarah worked, alongside Dana Pruitt and the dozen additional volunteers she had spent two months training in exactly this scenario, with a focused, disciplined intensity that left no room, in the moment, for the grief she understood was waiting for her the instant the last critical case stabilized.

She lost one more before the morning ended — a young volunteer named Ashley Turnbull, twenty-three years old, whose abdominal wound proved beyond even Sarah's considerable skill and the hospital's dwindling surgical supplies to fully repair — bringing the morning's final toll to three dead, seven wounded in varying degrees of severity, the costliest single day Ashwood had endured since the fire had fallen on twenty-three American cities five months earlier.

She sat with Curtis Danvers's wife, Melissa, in the hospital's small family waiting room a little past noon, having delivered news no physician ever grows capable of delivering without cost to themselves, and found herself, in the raw, exhausted aftermath of the morning's work, unable to offer the woman anything beyond the simple, honest truth of what her husband had actually done.

"He saved eight men's lives this morning, Melissa," Sarah said, holding both of the widow's hands in her own the way she had held so many grieving hands across five extraordinary months. "I need you to know that clearly, because I think it's going to matter to you someday, even though I understand it can't possibly matter enough today. He broke from cover to draw fire away from the rest of the convoy. Jack told me himself, not twenty minutes ago, that without what your husband did in those thirty seconds, this morning's numbers would have been catastrophically worse. He didn't die by accident, Melissa. He died choosing, deliberately, to give his life so that other men's wives wouldn't be sitting in this same room today."

Melissa Danvers wept for a long time before she finally spoke, her voice raw but steady when the words finally came. "He told me, the night before Jack first shot him at the Boyd farm, that he'd rather die than watch our children starve," she said. "I never imagined, when this town spared him instead, that the mercy would end with him dying to protect the very people who once showed it to him. I don't know if that's the cruelest irony I've ever heard or the most beautiful one. I think, some days, it might honestly be both."

VI. The Funeral

Ashwood buried three of its own on a bitter, clear afternoon in the third week of January — Sam Kessler, twenty-eight years old, a young husband and father whose loss struck Denise Marsh's entire southern sector with a grief the community had not experienced since Otis Vance's death months earlier; Ashley Turnbull, whose parents, refugees themselves from the ruins of Columbus, had lost their only child to a battle fought defending a town that had taken them in as strangers barely four months before; and Curtis Danvers, whose grave, at his widow's specific and deliberate request, was dug beside the small stone marker Bill Patterson had erected months earlier, near the exact spot in the cemetery behind Ashwood Community Baptist Church where Otis Vance himself had been laid to rest — a growing corner of ground, Rebecca observed quietly to Lydia, that had become, in five short months, the truest measure of exactly what this town's survival had actually cost.

Close to six hundred people gathered for the joint service, the largest single gathering Ashwood had assembled since the mass baptism two months earlier, and Rebecca stood before them at the graveside with her father's Bible open to the same second book of Samuel her own private grief had led her to that week, David's ancient lament over Saul and Jonathan carrying, across three thousand years, a weight that felt, to nearly everyone gathered in that cold January air, as though it had been written for this exact afternoon rather than borrowed from an ancient battlefield half a world and several millennia removed from County Road 17.

"The beauty of Israel is slain upon thy high places," she read, her voice carrying clear and steady across the gathered crowd despite the tears she made no effort to hide. *"How are the mighty fallen! Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Askelon; lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph... I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women. How are the mighty fallen, and the weapons of war perished!"*

She closed the reading and looked out over faces she had come to know individually across five remarkable months — Melissa Danvers standing with her two children, Sam Kessler's young widow holding an infant too small to understand what the gathered crowd had come to mourn, Ashley Turnbull's parents clinging to each other with the particular grief of people who had already lost everything once before and had not believed, until this morning, that this broken world still had more left to take from them.

"I don't have an easy word for any of you today," Rebecca said, her voice steadying with the same hard-won composure that had carried her through every difficult moment of the last five months. "I've stood at more gravesides this year than my father stood at in his entire thirty-one years of ministry, and I still don't have a formula that makes losses like this one feel survivable in the moment they actually happen. But I want to read you one more thing before we close, because I believe it with everything I have left today." She turned to Romans, chapter five. *"But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."* She looked up. "Curtis Danvers knew exactly what it meant to be given a mercy he had done nothing to earn. This town gave him that mercy five months ago, in the very dirt of Curtis Boyd's own farmyard, when Jack Reynolds chose to spare a desperate, dangerous man's life instead of ending it. Curtis Danvers spent every single day since trying to become worthy of that mercy, and yesterday morning, he finished that work in the most complete way a man possibly can — laying down exactly what had been given back to him, so that eight other families wouldn't have to bury what he was carrying instead."

Denise Marsh spoke next, stepping forward from among the gathered crowd at Rebecca's quiet invitation, her voice carrying the particular authority of a woman who had buried more than her own fair share of loss across the last six months and had never once, in all that grief, stopped showing up for the people still standing beside her. "Sam Kessler served under my command for four months," she said. "He used to tell me that joining the watch was the first time in his whole life he'd felt like his presence actually mattered to the people around him. I want his wife and his little girl to hear this plainly, because I don't think it can be said too many times: Sam mattered before the watch, and he mattered because of exactly the kind of man he already was underneath the uniform — steady, faithful, the first to volunteer for the hardest shift so someone with a family waiting up later wouldn't have to take it instead. He didn't become brave the day he died. He was already brave every single ordinary day before it, and I intend to make sure this whole town remembers that, long after today."

Ashley Turnbull's father, a quiet man named Kwame Turnbull who had walked his family the full distance from Columbus's ruins five months earlier, spoke last among the family testimonies, his voice breaking more than once as he found the words. "My daughter used to tell me this town saved her life twice," he said. "Once, when your checkpoint let us in instead of turning us away, hungry as we were, strangers to every single one of you. And a second time, she said, when she finally understood what your Pastor Whitfield's recordings were actually telling her, and she stopped being afraid of what came after this life, whatever happened in it first. I did not want her to join the watch. I told her so, more than once. She told me that a town willing to risk everything to take in strangers like us deserved someone willing to risk everything to protect it in return. I am the proudest and the most broken father who has ever stood in this cemetery, and I do not know how to hold both of those things at the same time,

except to trust that the God she believed in so completely is somehow already holding them both for me."

She closed with words her father had spoken at more funerals than she could ever properly count, words she had once found merely comforting in an abstract, theoretical way, and now understood, standing over three fresh graves in the bitter January cold, with a weight that had nothing theoretical left in it at all. *"Revelation twenty-one, verse four,"* she said. *"'And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.'* I do not know how many more graves this town is going to have to dig before this war with Marcus Kane finally ends, one way or another. I know that every single name in this ground today belongs, eternally, to the God who has already promised to wipe away every tear these losses have cost us. That promise doesn't make today hurt less. I don't think it was ever meant to. But I believe it means today isn't the end of their story, only the hardest chapter of it — and I intend to hold onto that belief with everything I have left, for as long as this town needs someone standing at the front of a crowd like this one, telling them it's still true."

VII. What Jack Carried

Jack Reynolds did not sleep for three full nights after the ambush, running the engagement back through his mind with the same relentless, self-punishing precision he had once applied to the two men he had lost in a village overseas whose name he still would not speak aloud — except that this time, sitting alone on his own porch in the bitter January cold, he found himself doing something he had never once managed to do in eleven years of carrying that older grief alone.

He prayed through it instead of simply enduring it.

"I keep running the ambush back," he told Walt Henderson, the two of them sharing the same porch, the same cold night air, the same hard silences that had carried both men through so many difficult conversations over the previous five months. "I varied the schedule. I rotated the route where the terrain allowed. I did everything Peter warned me Kane's people would be looking to exploit, and they still found the one stretch of road I could never fully protect, and it cost me three people, Walt. Three people who trusted me to bring them home."

"You want to hear something I've never told you," Walt said, after a long silence, his voice carrying an unusual weight. "I lost two men under my own command in Korea, seventy years ago now, give or take. Spent the better part of six decades carrying that the same way I watched you carry your own village before you ever told me a word about it directly. Do you know what finally set me free of it, Jack? Not forgetting. Not deciding, the way some men try to, that it wasn't really my fault. It was finally understanding Romans eight, verse one, all the way down into the parts of me that had never actually believed it before: 'There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.' Not no consequences. Not no grief. No condemnation. I stopped being the judge sentencing myself over and over for a decision I made with the best information I had in an impossible moment, and I let God be the judge instead — the same God who already paid, in full, for every failure I was still trying to punish myself for on my own."

Jack sat with that for a long time, the cold night air settling around both men, and when he finally spoke again, his voice carried something that had not been present in it three nights earlier. "Curtis Danvers didn't die because I failed him," he said slowly, testing the words the way he tested every conclusion, carefully, honestly, unwilling to accept comfort he had not first verified against the truth. "He died because he chose, in the hardest thirty seconds of his whole life, to spend himself protecting the exact kind of mercy this town once showed him. I think I've been so busy grieving what I couldn't prevent that I almost missed what he actually did with the life this town gave him back. I don't want to miss that anymore, Walt. I want to honor it instead."

He spent the following week producing, for the council's careful review, the most thorough after-action report he had ever compiled — every decision examined, every alternative considered, every lesson extracted with the same unflinching discipline he had once brought to reviewing missions that had cost considerably more than three lives on a far larger, more anonymous scale. He recommended, and the council approved within days, a complete restructuring of the joint convoy's route planning, incorporating Sylvia Marchetti's own scouts into a shared reconnaissance rotation that would, going forward, sweep every mile of contested road no less than six hours ahead of any actual convoy movement. He recommended expanding the quick-reaction force's response radius, and he recommended, with a candor that cost him something visible to admit in front of the full council, that Ashwood's leadership begin planning, in earnest, for the real and growing possibility that Marcus Kane's next move would not be another probing ambush, but the full, direct assault Peter Ashby had warned them, months earlier, was always the outcome Kane's patience was ultimately building toward.

"I don't say that to frighten this town," Jack told the council, closing his report. "I say it because Curtis Danvers, and Sam Kessler, and Ashley Turnbull deserve a town that learned everything it possibly could from what their deaths cost us, rather than a town that simply grieved and moved on unchanged. I intend to make sure their sacrifice actually makes the next fight, whenever it comes, more survivable for everyone still standing to fight it."

VIII. What Danforth Sent

Sylvia Marchetti arrived in Ashwood three days after the funeral, having driven the same dangerous stretch of County Road 17 herself despite Jack's careful warnings, bringing with her not merely her own personal condolences but a formal proposal that would reshape the alliance between the two towns for the remainder of that hard winter.

"I'm not going to pretend this cost you more than it cost us," she told Daniel Brooks bluntly, sitting across from him in his office with a map of the contested territory spread between them. "You lost three people protecting a convoy that was half carrying goods for my own town's benefit. I don't take that lightly, Daniel, and I don't intend to let it go unanswered. I'm proposing a joint security detail from here forward — my own people, alongside yours, sharing the risk on every single run, split fifty-fifty on personnel regardless of which direction the convoy happens to be running. And I'm proposing something else too, something I should have offered months ago. A mutual defense pact, formal and complete, not just a trading partnership with occasional cooperation. If Kane ever moves against Ashwood in force, Danforth answers the call. If he ever moves against Danforth, the same holds true in

reverse. I've watched what your town has built these last five months, and I'll tell you plainly — I would rather stand or fall beside a town willing to bleed the way yours just bled for a shared cause, than keep pretending Danforth can somehow stay neutral in a fight that's clearly coming for both of us regardless."

Brooks accepted both proposals without hesitation, understanding, in the raw aftermath of the worst single day Ashwood had endured since the fire fell on twenty-three American cities, exactly how much a genuine, formalized alliance might come to matter in whatever confrontation still lay ahead. "Sylvia," he said, before she left his office that evening, "I need you to know something else too, whatever it's worth to you. Three of the people I buried this week believed, with everything they had, in something considerably larger than either of our towns' survival. I don't know what you believe, personally, about any of that. But I want you to understand that the same faith holding this town together right now is part of why I believe we're going to keep standing, whatever Kane eventually throws at us — and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't praying, every single night now, that Danforth finds its own way to that same kind of strength before this whole thing is finally over."

Marchetti was quiet for a moment, studying him with an expression Brooks couldn't quite read. "My own mother used to pray the way I hear your Rebecca Whitfield preaches," she said finally. "I stopped, a long time ago, for reasons that don't matter much anymore. I'll admit to you, Daniel, that watching what your town survived this week, and how it's choosing to carry that grief, has me thinking about picking the habit back up. I'm not promising you anything more than that. But I'm not dismissing it either, not anymore."

She stayed through that Thursday's gathering before she left for home, sitting quietly near the back of the fellowship hall, and though she did not come forward that night, Rebecca noted, in the private journal she still kept faithfully after every gathering, that Danforth's blunt, capable mayor had wept openly during the closing prayer for the first time since Rebecca had known her — a small, private crack in a hard exterior that Rebecca chose to hold gently rather than remark upon, understanding, from her own long journey, exactly how much patience some doors required before they finally, fully opened.

The joint security detail Marchetti proposed began running within the week, Danforth's own trained volunteers rotating alongside Ashwood's watch on every convoy movement, and the formal mutual defense pact was signed by both mayors in a brief, solemn ceremony at the town square two days later — a piece of paper that carried, Daniel Brooks told the small gathered crowd that afternoon, considerably more weight than its modest, handwritten appearance suggested, representing the first formal alliance either town had entered since the collapse of the nation both of them had once called their common home.

IX. What the Road Remembered

Jack walked County Road 17 alone one final time before the January snow buried the last visible traces of the ambush, standing at the exact bend where Curtis Danvers had fallen, the roadside grass still faintly marked by five days of hard winter weather, and found himself, in that quiet, solitary moment,

praying the same prayer he had prayed kneeling over the man's body in the ringing silence after Whitmore's withdrawal.

Greater love hath no man than this.

He thought of the three fresh graves standing now in the cemetery behind Ashwood Community Baptist Church, in the same corner of ground where Otis Vance and Bill Patterson's own near-miss had already taught this town more about the true cost of its survival than any of them had ever wanted to learn. He thought of Melissa Danvers, raising two children alone now in a town her husband had died defending, carrying forward a mercy that had cost the family everything and had somehow, in Sarah's careful accounting, still saved eight other families from carrying that same grief themselves. He thought of Sylvia Marchetti's formal pact, of the joint security detail that would run this same road within the week, of a war with Marcus Kane that had, in the space of eleven brutal minutes, stopped being an abstract, gathering threat and become, instead, the costliest and most undeniable reality Ashwood, Ohio had faced since the sky itself had first gone dark five months earlier.

Lydia Hayes closed her account of that terrible week with words that would, in the years ahead, come to mark, more clearly than any other single passage in her growing history, the exact moment Ashwood's long defense of itself stopped being merely a matter of walls and watchtowers and became, instead, a matter of blood freely and deliberately given.

Psalm one hundred sixteen, verse fifteen, says that precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints, she wrote. *I have watched this town bury three more of its own this week, and I do not believe, having watched the particular manner of their dying, that the psalmist's ancient word was chosen carelessly. There was nothing careless in what Curtis Danvers did on County Road 17. There was nothing careless in Sam Kessler's discipline under fire, or in the last desperate hours Sarah Collins spent trying to save Ashley Turnbull's life. Ashwood has learned, this week, exactly what its survival is actually going to cost — not in the abstract language of watchtowers and food councils, but in the specific, irreplaceable currency of its own sons and daughters. I do not know how many more such weeks lie ahead of us before Marcus Kane's shadow is finally, fully answered, one way or another. I know only that this town has already proven, in the worst possible way, exactly what it is prepared to pay to remain what it has chosen to become.*

Melissa Danvers came to the Thursday gathering herself, three weeks after the funeral, her two children beside her, and asked Rebecca, in front of the whole assembled Remnant, whether she might be the one to read the passage that closed the evening's study — a small, quiet request that Rebecca granted without hesitation, understanding exactly what it cost the young widow to stand before that room at all so soon after her loss. Melissa read from Philippians, chapter one, her voice steady though her hands trembled visibly around the borrowed Bible. *"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain,"* she read, and looked up at the gathered circle before continuing. *"Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you."* She closed the Bible gently. "I used to think that verse was only about Paul's own readiness to die for his faith," she said. "I understand it differently now. I think it's also about the people left behind, the ones who have to keep abiding in the flesh a while longer, carrying forward whatever the ones who've gone ahead were building. Curtis is gain now, whatever that costs the rest of us who

loved him. I intend to spend whatever years I have left making sure his children understand exactly what their father actually died protecting, and why it was worth it to him, all the way to the very end."

The snow came that night, heavy and silent, covering the last visible scars of County Road 17 beneath a clean, unbroken white that would not fully melt again until spring — and beneath it, in the frozen January ground of a small church cemetery, three fresh graves stood as the newest and most costly testimony yet to a war that had, in a single bloody morning, become entirely, permanently real.

Part Five — The Gathering Storm

ASHES OF AMERICA — BOOK ONE AFTER THE VANISHING by Dr. Paul Crawford

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A False Promise of Peace

"Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God." — 2 Thessalonians 2:3–4 (KJV)

"And through his policy also he shall cause craft to prosper in his hand; and he shall magnify himself in his heart, and by peace shall destroy many." — Daniel 8:25 (KJV)

I. What Frank Pelletier Caught

The signal reached Frank Pelletier's basement on a bitter February evening, six months after the vanishing and three weeks after the funeral of Curtis Danvers, Sam Kessler, and Ashley Turnbull — a broadcast considerably stronger and considerably better organized than anything the old ham operator had picked up since the final, despairing transmission of the Federal Emergency Council back in the first terrible week of the collapse.

"This is different," Frank told Daniel Brooks, summoning him to the basement with an urgency that carried, in Frank's own careful, measured voice, more weight than Brooks had heard from him since the very earliest days of the crisis. "Strong signal, professionally produced, repeating on a fixed schedule across multiple frequencies. Somebody with real resources is behind this, Daniel. Real infrastructure. I haven't heard anything like it since the whole system went dark."

The broadcast, when Brooks finally heard it himself, standing crowded into Frank's small basement alongside Jack, Ethan, and Rebecca, carried a voice unlike anything any of them had heard in the six

exhausting months since the vanishing — calm, measured, warm in a way that felt, after half a year of grief and static and desperate improvisation, almost physically soothing to listen to.

"To the survivors of a broken world," the voice said, *"I bring you word of hope. My name is Alexander Cain, and I speak to you today as the newly appointed Secretary-General of the Global Recovery Council, a body formed from the surviving representatives of nations across every continent, united — for the first time in human history — not by treaty or by trade, but by the simple, shared recognition that the old divisions which once separated us cost us everything, and that only genuine unity can rebuild what those divisions destroyed."*

The voice continued for nearly twenty minutes, laying out, with an eloquence that struck even Jack Reynolds, sitting in careful, professional silence through the entire broadcast, as remarkable in a way he could not immediately name — a comprehensive plan for global recovery: standardized emergency currency to replace the collapsed economies of a hundred different nations; coordinated food and medical distribution through a newly formed international relief structure; a promise of restored communications infrastructure within eighteen months; and, threaded through every practical promise, a deeper, more emotionally resonant appeal to a species that had, in a single catastrophic season, lost more than it had ever lost before in recorded history.

"We do not yet fully understand what happened to us six months ago," Cain's voice continued, and Rebecca felt something cold settle into her chest at the words, though she could not, in that first listening, have said exactly why. *"Many explanations have been offered — some religious, some scientific, some frankly opportunistic, offered by those seeking to exploit grief for influence rather than genuinely address it. I do not intend, tonight, to adjudicate between those explanations. I intend only to say this: whatever caused the vanishing, whatever caused the terrible violence that followed it, the task in front of us now is the same task it has always been, in every age of human suffering — to rebuild, together, what was broken, and to ensure that the divisions of the past never again cost us so dearly. I ask only for your patience, your cooperation, and your trust, as we begin, together, the long work of bringing peace back to a world that has forgotten, these last six months, what peace even felt like."*

Within days, word of the broadcast had spread through Ashwood with a speed that startled even Lydia Hayes, who had spent six months tracking exactly how fast news traveled through a town starved of reliable information. Grocery lines, watch rotations, the growing crowds at Sunday services — everywhere Lydia went that week, she heard the same cautious, hungry hope in people's voices, the particular sound of a community that had spent half a year believing itself entirely alone in a broken world, suddenly wondering whether that isolation might finally, mercifully, be ending.

"My cousin's family made it to a relief point outside Columbus," she overheard a young mother telling another in the food line, her voice bright with an excitement Lydia had not heard from any Ashwood resident in months. "Real supplies, she said. Organized, official, not just neighbors scraping together whatever they could spare. Maybe this is it. Maybe this is finally the part where things start getting better instead of just barely holding on."

Lydia recorded the exchange carefully in her notebook, understanding, even as she wrote it down, exactly how much weight that kind of hope carried after six months of unrelenting hardship — and understanding, too, with a growing unease she could not yet fully articulate, exactly how dangerous

that same hope might prove to be if it turned out to be resting on a foundation considerably less solid than it currently appeared.

II. What the Council Felt

The reaction in Frank Pelletier's basement, in the silence that followed the broadcast's conclusion, was neither unanimous nor simple, and it was Daniel Brooks, exhausted by six months of carrying a weight no single mayor of any American town had ever been asked to carry alone, who spoke first, his voice carrying something Rebecca had not heard from him in months: real, unguarded hope.

"If even half of what he's promising is real," Brooks said, "this could mean help finally arriving. Actual coordinated relief. Actual restored infrastructure. I've spent six months telling this town that no one was coming to save us, Rebecca, because it was true, and I hated saying it every single time. What if it's finally not true anymore?"

Jack was quiet for a longer moment, his tactical mind working through the broadcast with the same careful scrutiny he brought to every piece of intelligence, before he finally spoke. "I want to be careful here," he said. "Everything in me wants to feel exactly what Daniel's feeling right now. Six months of watching this town bleed for every inch of stability we've built, and a voice on the radio just promised to make all of it easier. That's a powerful thing to hear, and I don't trust powerful things I haven't had time to properly examine." He looked at Rebecca. "You went very quiet during that broadcast. What were you hearing that the rest of us weren't?"

Rebecca chose her words carefully, aware of the weight they would carry in a room already tilting toward relief. "I heard a man promise peace and unity to a world desperate enough to accept almost any terms to get it," she said. "I heard him dismiss, gently but unmistakably, every religious explanation for the vanishing as one option among many, offered by people he called opportunistic. And I heard him say something else, right at the very end, that I don't think either of you fully caught, because it was said so smoothly it almost slid right past — 'the divisions of the past.' I've heard my father preach on this exact kind of language before, from the ninth chapter of Daniel, from the second chapter of Second Thessalonians. I'm not saying Alexander Cain is definitely the figure Scripture warns about. I am saying that a man rising suddenly to global authority in the exact aftermath of the exact catastrophe my father spent his whole ministry warning us to expect, promising peace to a world that desperately wants to believe peace is finally within reach — that is exactly the pattern Scripture told us to watch for, and I think this town owes it to itself to watch very, very carefully before it decides what to feel about tonight's broadcast."

Sarah Collins felt the pull of that same hope more acutely than she expected, standing in a hospital that had spent six months rationing every single vial of insulin and every roll of gauze with a discipline that had cost lives, cost dignity, cost more sleepless nights than she could properly count. She said as much to Jack privately, two days after the first broadcast, unable to fully separate her physician's desperate longing for real medical resources from the caution Rebecca had urged the whole town to hold.

"I keep thinking about Tyler Osei's seizure medication," she told him. "About the diabetic patients I still can't fully stock for. If this Council actually delivers real supply chains, real manufacturing capacity, I

don't know how to weigh that against Rebecca's caution, Jack. People are going to die this year from things that used to be completely treatable, regardless of what Alexander Cain's true intentions turn out to be. I believe everything Rebecca's telling us about the pattern. I also can't stop thinking about how many of my patients might not survive long enough to see whether that pattern ever fully plays out."

Jack didn't offer her easy comfort, understanding, from six months of hard decisions of his own, that Sarah's dilemma deserved better than a tidy answer. "I don't think you're wrong to feel that tension," he said. "I think the whole point of what Rebecca's asking this town to do isn't to pretend the tension doesn't exist. It's to hold both truths honestly — that real help might genuinely be needed, and that the price attached to it might genuinely be too high to pay — without letting the first truth blind us to the second. That's a harder discipline than simply choosing one truth and ignoring the other, Sarah. I don't think either of us gets to escape carrying it."

III. What the Remnant Studied

The Thursday gathering that week filled the sanctuary to a capacity Rebecca had not seen since the mass baptism two months earlier, word of the broadcast having spread through Ashwood with the same speed every piece of significant news now traveled through a town that had learned, across six hard months, to pay close attention to anything that might change the shape of its survival.

Rebecca opened her father's Bible to Second Thessalonians, chapter two, and read the passage slowly, deliberately, letting each phrase settle fully into the silent, attentive sanctuary before moving to the next. *"Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God."*

"I want to be very careful with what I say next," she told the gathered crowd, "because I have watched, across six months of studying my father's sermons, exactly how easy it is to take a passage like this one and turn it into fear rather than discernment. My father never once preached prophecy to frighten people. He preached it so that when the world's hardest deceptions finally arrived, his people would already know what to watch for, and would not be swept away by them the way an unprepared world so easily could be." She looked out over faces she had come to know intimately across six extraordinary months — Ethan, Sarah, Jack, Noah, Dana, Peter Ashby, dozens more. "I am not standing here tonight telling you Alexander Cain is definitely the Antichrist Scripture warns about. I don't know that, and anyone who claims certainty about that tonight is claiming more than Scripture itself actually gives us to claim. What I am telling you is this: the pattern fits closely enough that we owe it to ourselves, and to this whole watching, hurting world, to test everything we hear from this man against the Word rather than simply against how comforting it feels to hear it."

She turned to First John, chapter four, verse one, a passage she had marked earlier that week in careful preparation. *"Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world."* "This isn't a new command, given only for this exact moment," she said. "It's the same command the church has always carried, in every age, against every

counterfeit that's ever risen promising to fix what only God can actually fix. I want this whole Remnant, starting tonight, listening carefully to every single broadcast that comes out of this Global Recovery Council — not with panic, and not with the kind of reflexive suspicion that refuses even honest, practical help when it's genuinely offered. But with discernment. With Scripture open in one hand and the news in the other, testing every promise against the only standard that's never once failed this town in six months of testing everything else."

Grant Sowell, sitting in his now-familiar spot near the front of the sanctuary — a position he had migrated to gradually, week by week, over the previous two months — raised his hand during the discussion that followed, a habit he had picked up from his years as a science teacher that had never quite left him even in a congregation rather than a classroom. "I want to push back on something, respectfully," he said. "Everything you're describing sounds, to someone standing where I'm still standing, like it could just as easily be confirmation bias. A grieving, traumatized population primed by decades of prophecy fiction and sermon literature to see the Antichrist in literally any powerful figure who rises during a crisis. I'm not saying you're wrong, Rebecca. I'm saying I think this room owes it to its own credibility to hold the possibility that Alexander Cain is exactly what he appears to be — an unusually capable man, offering unusually needed help, at exactly the moment the world happens to desperately need it."

Rebecca did not flinch from the challenge, understanding, after two months of Grant's careful, honest resistance, exactly how much respect the question deserved. "That's a fair challenge, Grant, and I don't want to dismiss it," she said. "I'll say this in return. If Alexander Cain is simply what he appears to be — a capable man offering genuine, uncomplicated help — then testing his promises against Scripture costs this town nothing at all. We accept the food, the medicine, the restored infrastructure, gratefully, the same way we've accepted every other genuine kindness that's reached us since the vanishing. But if he is what my father's whole ministry warned us to watch for, then the cost of failing to test him carefully enough could be considerably higher than anything this town has paid so far, including the graves we dug three weeks ago on County Road 17. I don't think caution costs us anything if I'm wrong, Grant. I think it might cost us everything if I'm right and this town simply wasn't paying attention."

IV. What Kane Decided

Word reached Ashwood's leadership within the week, through Peter Ashby's own network of remaining contacts inside Iron Ridge's territory, that Marcus Kane had responded to the Global Recovery Council's emergence with the same cold, calculating pragmatism he brought to every strategic decision he had made since the vanishing began.

"He's already sent a formal delegation," Peter reported to Jack and Ethan, laying out what his contacts had confirmed. "Offered Iron Ridge's territory as what he's calling a 'stabilized regional zone' — meaning, in practice, that he intends to position himself as the local authority answerable to Cain's new structure, rather than an independent warlord operating outside it. It's a smart move, from his own perspective. It gives him legitimacy he doesn't currently have, access to resources this new council is

apparently already promising to distribute, and cover for everything he's already done to eleven towns under the banner of 'restoring regional stability' rather than naked conquest."

Peter added a further detail that had reached him only that morning, through a contact still quietly sympathetic to his own escape. "Whitmore's already boasting about it inside Iron Ridge," he said. "Telling the men that Ashwood's continued independence is about to become an official liability rather than just a local nuisance — that once Kane's regional zone is formally recognized, the Global Recovery Council itself will have every justification it needs to authorize whatever force is necessary to bring a holdout town like yours into compliance. I don't know how much of that is genuine intelligence and how much is Whitmore simply feeding the men what they want to hear before a fight. But I'd rather Ashwood hear the boast now and plan around it, than be surprised by it later."

Jack absorbed this with the particular grim clarity he now brought to every piece of intelligence concerning Marcus Kane. "That's considerably worse for us than Kane operating alone," he said. "A regional warlord we can eventually out-organize, out-alliance, maybe even out-wait if we hold long enough. A regional warlord backed by a global authority with real resources and real reach is a considerably harder problem — because it means whatever conflict we eventually have with Iron Ridge stops being a local matter between two Ohio towns, and starts being a test case for whether this new Global Recovery Council is willing to back its own local enforcer against a town that refuses to fall in line."

Daniel Brooks, hearing the assessment, felt the cautious hope the broadcast had briefly kindled in him three weeks earlier curdle into something closer to dread. "So Ashwood's choice to hold out, to stay independent, to keep building what we've built here — that choice just got a great deal more dangerous," he said.

"I believe so, yes," Jack said. "I don't say that to discourage anyone in this room from making it anyway. I say it because I think this council needs to go into whatever comes next with clear eyes about exactly what refusing Cain's system might eventually cost us, the same way we went into building our own defenses six months ago with clear eyes about what Marcus Kane might eventually cost us then."

Noah Simmons, sitting quietly through most of the strategic discussion in his now-familiar role supporting Jack's planning sessions, found himself turning the news over with a particular kind of dread that surprised him, given how much worse news he had already absorbed in his eighteen years. "I keep thinking about how easy it must have been for people in Cedar Hollow, or wherever else, to talk themselves into accepting Kane's early help," he said. "Nobody wakes up and decides to hand their whole town over to a tyrant. They just accept one reasonable-sounding kindness at a time until the kindness turns out to have strings attached that are too tight to cut loose anymore. I think that's what scares me most about this Cain broadcast. It doesn't feel like a trap. It feels like exactly the kind of relief this whole hurting world has been praying for since the day the vanishing happened. I think that might be the most dangerous kind of trap there is."

Jack looked at him with something close to quiet pride. "That's exactly the discernment this whole town needs to hold onto in the months ahead," he said. "You've grown a great deal since the night you showed up at my door asking for a radio post instead of a rifle, Noah. I don't think I tell you that often enough."

V. What Cain Said Next

The second major broadcast arrived three weeks later, and it was this one, more than the first, that Rebecca would return to often in the months that followed as the moment she stopped holding her assessment of Alexander Cain as merely cautious and began holding it as something closer to settled conviction.

"Friends," Cain's voice said, carrying the same warm, measured eloquence that had characterized every broadcast since the first, *"I want to speak tonight about the communities that have chosen to stand apart from the Global Recovery Council's growing structure — proud, independent towns, in many cases, who have survived remarkably well on their own resources and their own courage, and who understandably wonder whether joining a larger structure means surrendering something precious they've fought hard to preserve."*

"I understand that hesitation. I respect it, genuinely. But I want to offer a gentle correction to any community still weighing this choice. The old world taught us that strength meant standing alone, that true security came from walls and weapons and suspicion of every neighbor beyond our own borders. Six months of catastrophe should have taught every one of us, by now, exactly how costly that old thinking actually was. I am not asking any community to surrender its identity, its faith, its particular character. I am asking every community still standing apart to consider whether the peace and security they've fought so hard for might actually be more durable, not less, inside a structure built around genuine global cooperation rather than isolated self-reliance. The choice, of course, remains yours. But I would be doing you a disservice if I did not say, plainly, that the resources — the food, the medicine, the restored infrastructure this Council intends to distribute in the months ahead — will necessarily flow first, and most fully, to the communities who have chosen partnership over isolation. I do not offer this as a threat, friends. I offer it only as an honest accounting of how limited resources must, of practical necessity, be prioritized in a broken world still learning to rebuild."

Jack, listening once more from Frank Pelletier's crowded basement, felt something settle into cold, certain clarity the moment the broadcast ended. "That's not a gentle correction," he said. "That's an ultimatum, dressed in the softest possible language. Join, or be deprioritized. I've heard men issue exactly that kind of threat before, in exactly that kind of voice, and it's always the voice of someone who already knows he's going to eventually need force to finish what persuasion alone won't complete."

Rebecca thought of Daniel, chapter eight, a passage she had returned to often in the three weeks since the first broadcast — the prophecy of a coming ruler who would prosper "by peace" even as that same peace became the very instrument of destruction for those who trusted it too completely. *"And through his policy also he shall cause craft to prosper in his hand; and he shall magnify himself in his heart, and by peace shall destroy many."* She read the verse aloud to the small group gathered in Frank's basement, her voice steady despite the weight of what she was beginning to believe with increasing certainty.

"I don't think this is confirmation bias anymore, Grant," she said quietly, though Grant himself was not present that particular evening, the words carrying instead to the small circle who had become, over six months, her closest advisors in matters of both faith and strategy. "I think we just watched a man threaten an entire broken world with deprivation for daring to stay independent, wrapped in language so gentle that half the people listening tonight probably didn't even recognize it as a threat. That's not simply capable leadership responding to crisis. That's exactly the kind of craft Daniel warned us to watch for, prospering in exactly the hand Scripture told us it would prosper in."

VI. What Grant Finally Said

Grant Sowell came to Rebecca's office two days after the second broadcast, and the conversation that followed would become, in the months ahead, one that Rebecca carried with her as evidence of exactly how patiently and how faithfully God could work even in a heart that had spent two years actively resisting Him.

"I listened to it again this morning," Grant told her, sitting across the desk with an expression she had not seen on him before — not his usual careful, skeptical composure, but something rawer, more uncertain. "The second broadcast. I wanted to find the flaw in your reading of it, Rebecca, I really did. I've spent two months in the back of your sanctuary, and then closer to the front, telling myself I was just there for the community, for whatever comfort the ritual of it offered without needing to actually believe the substance behind it." He was quiet for a moment. "I couldn't find the flaw. I listened to that man threaten an entire broken world with starvation for the crime of wanting to remain free, and I understood, for the first time since my daughter disappeared, exactly what my grief had actually been protecting me from seeing clearly. I've spent two years angry at a God I told myself might not exist, for taking my family without asking my permission. I listened to Alexander Cain this morning, and I understood, with a clarity I can't fully explain to you, that whatever else is true about all of this, that man is not offering peace. He's offering the appearance of peace, in exchange for something considerably larger than any of us have yet fully reckoned with him wanting to take."

Rebecca said nothing for a long moment, giving him the same patient space she had learned, across six months, to give every grieving heart working its way toward the truth. "What do you want to do with that, Grant?" she finally asked.

"I want to stop standing outside a door I've already walked halfway through," Grant said. "I lost my whole family to something I couldn't explain, couldn't control, couldn't fight. I am not going to lose whatever's left of my own soul to a man promising peace while quietly preparing, I now believe, to take considerably more than he's honest enough to admit he's asking for." He looked at her directly. "I believe Jesus Christ died and rose again, Rebecca. I believe my daughter is somewhere safer than anywhere Alexander Cain could ever promise to build, and I believe, watching that broadcast this morning, that I finally understand what my own father-in-law used to try to tell me before I stopped listening to anyone at all. I'm asking you to help me do whatever comes next. I don't want to carry this alone for one more single day."

They prayed together in the church office that afternoon, the door closed against the cold February wind, and when Grant Sowell finally opened his eyes, Rebecca understood that she had just watched the longest and most patiently fought battle of her entire six-month ministry reach, at last, its quiet, hard-won conclusion.

VII. What Lydia Recorded

Lydia Hayes devoted an entire section of her growing archive that February to the emergence of Alexander Cain and the Global Recovery Council, working with the same careful, methodical thoroughness she had brought to every other chapter of Ashwood's difficult history — cross-referencing broadcast transcripts, tracking which communities had already formally joined the new structure, noting, with growing unease, the speed at which resistance to joining seemed to be narrowing across the broken landscape of what had once been the United States.

"I do not know, writing this in February, whether Alexander Cain will prove to be exactly what Rebecca Whitfield and her father's own careful theology suggests he might be," she wrote. *"I know only that I have watched, across two broadcasts and three weeks, a pattern emerge that troubles me more deeply than anything since the fire fell on twenty-three American cities six months ago — a man offering genuine, badly needed help, wrapped around a quiet, patient insistence that help and submission must eventually become the same transaction. I have watched desperate communities across this broken region accept that transaction gratefully, town after town, each one telling itself, I suspect, exactly what Ashwood's own council told itself in the first hour of hearing his voice: that surely this help arrives without any hidden cost attached. I pray, writing this tonight, that Ashwood's own caution proves wiser than whatever confidence is currently carrying so many other communities toward a structure none of us yet fully understand the true shape of."*

She closed her entry with a passage Rebecca had shared with her that same week, from the sixth chapter of Revelation — a passage neither woman fully understood yet in all its implications, but that had settled, for both of them, into something closer to dread than mere caution. *"And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer."* Lydia did not claim to know, writing that entry by lantern light in the cold February dark, exactly what the coming months held for Ashwood, for Alexander Cain, for the broken world both now shared. She knew only that the town she had spent six months chronicling had chosen, once again, to stand apart from the easier, more comfortable path — and that the cost of that choice, whatever it eventually proved to be, was a cost she intended to keep recording as faithfully and as honestly as she had recorded every other difficult chapter of Ashwood's remarkable survival.

VIII. What the Council Chose

Daniel Brooks called the full council together one final time that February, the decision they faced laid out with a clarity that had not been available to them three weeks earlier, before Cain's second broadcast had made the true shape of his eventual demands considerably harder to misread.

"I want everyone in this room to understand exactly what we're choosing, and exactly what it might cost us," Brooks said. "If we formally decline the Global Recovery Council's structure, we may lose access to resources this town badly needs — medicine, supplies, whatever restored infrastructure eventually reaches communities that joined. We already know Marcus Kane has aligned himself with this new authority, which means our refusal isn't simply a matter of principle anymore. It's a decision that could bring Kane's forces against us with considerably more backing than he's currently operating with alone."

"And if we join?" Curtis Boyd asked, though his own tone made clear he already suspected the answer.

"Then we accept, eventually, whatever terms come attached to that partnership," Jack said. "Based on everything we've heard so far, and everything Peter's contacts have confirmed about how this structure is already operating in the communities that have joined it, I don't believe those terms stay limited to logistics and cooperation for very long. I believe, based on everything Rebecca's shown us from Scripture and everything my own tactical instincts are telling me independently, that joining eventually means surrendering exactly the kind of independence — and exactly the kind of faith — that has held this town together since the very first week of this whole catastrophe."

Rebecca spoke last, her voice carrying the same settled conviction that had carried her through six extraordinary months of loss and discovery in equal measure. "I can't make this decision for the council," she said. "I can only tell you what I believe, as clearly as I know how to say it. I believe Alexander Cain represents exactly the kind of counterfeit peace Scripture has always warned God's people to watch for — a peace that costs, eventually, everything a person or a town actually values, in exchange for a security that was never real to begin with. I believe this town has already paid too high a price, in blood and in grief, to trade what it's built for a promise that dissolves the moment its true cost finally comes due. Whatever this council decides, I intend to keep this Remnant faithful to what we've already found, regardless of what joining or refusing this new structure eventually costs any of us."

Daniel Brooks looked around the room one final time, at faces that had carried Ashwood through six months of catastrophe no single town should ever have had to survive alone, and made the decision that would, in the difficult months ahead, define the entire remaining course of Ashwood's story.

"Then we stay independent," he said. "Whatever it costs us. I did not watch this town bury three of its own on County Road 17, did not watch it build a defense force and a food council and a church that reaches half this broken region, just to hand it all over now to a man whose peace apparently comes with a bill none of us have fully seen yet. We hold. The same way we've held since the very first night the lights went out. We hold, and we trust that whatever we lose by holding, we're going to gain something considerably more valuable in return."

Grant Sowell was baptized the following Sunday, in a smaller, quieter ceremony than the mass baptism two months earlier, held indoors this time against the deep February cold, in a portable tank Curtis Boyd had hauled up from his own farm and Roy Castillo had helped fill and warm with painstaking effort — a ceremony Rebecca considered, privately, every bit as significant as the sixty who had gone under the water in the creek that November morning, precisely because of how long and how honestly Grant's own road to it had run. He held his daughter's photograph in his coat pocket as he went under, refusing, like so many others before him, to be parted from what mattered most even for the length of

the ceremony itself, and came up weeping in a way the whole gathered congregation understood needed no further explanation.

"I spent two years asking God why He let this happen to me," Grant told the small congregation afterward, his voice thick with an emotion he no longer tried to hide. "I don't have an answer to that question today any more than I had one yesterday. But I have something I didn't have yesterday, which is the certainty that whatever happens to this town in the fight that's apparently still coming for us, I am not facing it alone anymore, and neither is my daughter, wherever she is, waiting for a father who finally, finally understood what she already knew."

Outside, the February snow lay deep and unbroken across a town that had, in the space of six extraordinary months, buried its dead, fed its hungry, sheltered its refugees, built its defenses, found its faith, and now, in the quiet, resolute conviction of a council that understood exactly what it was choosing, prepared itself for whatever cost still lay ahead — a small, stubborn town in Ohio, standing apart from a world rapidly reorganizing itself around a peace that Rebecca Whitfield, and a growing number of the people she loved, had become entirely, unshakably convinced was never actually peace at all.

ASHES OF AMERICA — BOOK ONE AFTER THE VANISHING by Dr. Paul Crawford

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Choosing Sides

"And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve... but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." — Joshua 24:15 (KJV)

"How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him." — 1 Kings 18:21 (KJV)

I. What Frightened People Wanted

The council's decision to remain independent of Alexander Cain's Global Recovery Council had not, Daniel Brooks understood within days of announcing it, settled the matter for every resident of Ashwood the way it had settled it for the leadership gathered in the fellowship hall that February evening.

The dissent began quietly, in the ordinary conversations of a town exhausted by seven months of unrelenting hardship — a murmur in the food lines, a doubt voiced over a shared meal, a growing undercurrent of exhaustion among people who had buried friends and neighbors on County Road 17 only weeks earlier and could not, some of them, understand why their leadership had chosen to keep fighting a war that a simple broadcast seemed to offer an end to. By the second week of March, the

murmur had a name, a face, and a growing following: a respected local businessman named Frank Ostrander, who had run Ashwood's small farm supply store for twenty years before the vanishing and had lost, in the ambush on County Road 17, a nephew who had been driving the convoy's third vehicle.

Ostrander was not, Lydia Hayes was careful to note in the growing archive she kept of that difficult spring, a man motivated by cowardice or by any hidden allegiance to Marcus Kane's ambitions. He was, in the plainest and most honest accounting she could offer, a grieving man who had watched this town pay an escalating, devastating price for its independence, and who had concluded, with a logic Lydia found herself unable to entirely dismiss even as she disagreed with it, that continued resistance might simply be costing more than it was worth.

"I buried my sister's only son three weeks ago," Ostrander told the small crowd that had begun gathering, informally at first, in the back room of what remained of his own store, "and I am tired, in a way I don't know how to fully explain to people who haven't lost what I've lost, of watching this town's leadership choose principle over survival, again and again, while the graves behind that church keep filling up. Alexander Cain is offering food, medicine, an end to exactly the kind of violence that took my nephew's life. I don't understand what we're actually protecting anymore by refusing him, except our own stubborn pride."

He was not alone in that grief, and the faces that gathered around him in those first informal meetings told their own quiet, sorrowful story. A widow named Patricia Hale, who had lost her husband to the same influenza outbreak that swept briefly through the fairground refugee camp in January, sat near the front of every gathering, saying little, but nodding whenever Ostrander described the exhaustion of raising three children alone in a town still bracing nightly for another attack. A young father named Desmond Reyes — no relation, he was always careful to clarify, to the federal official whose voice had once carried the country's last official broadcast — spoke more often, his own arguments carrying a sharper, more practical edge than Ostrander's grief-laden appeals. "I'm not interested in theology tonight," he told the gathering more than once. "I'm interested in whether my children eat next winter. Cain's Council is already delivering real resources to towns forty miles from here. I want to know why my family should keep going without, for the sake of a principle that doesn't put food on my table."

II. What Grew in the Back Room

By the third week of March, Ostrander's informal gatherings had grown into something considerably more organized — a faction numbering, by Ethan Walker's careful and worried count, somewhere close to two hundred residents, meeting regularly to discuss what Ostrander had begun calling, without any apparent sense of the irony in the phrase, "a reasonable path to peace."

The faction's arguments, Lydia found, cataloguing them with the same careful, evenhanded thoroughness she brought to every difficult chapter of Ashwood's history, were rarely stated as outright rejection of the town's faith or its watch — most of Ostrander's followers, in fact, continued attending Rebecca's Sunday services even as they argued, in the same week's gatherings at Ostrander's store, that the town's political and military independence had become an unaffordable luxury. Their case rested on a handful of recurring themes: the mounting casualty count, now standing at four dead and

considerably more wounded since the ambush on County Road 17; the growing strain on the food council's resources, still recovering from a hard winter and facing the uncertain demands of a spring planting season that would need every available hand; and a genuine, understandable exhaustion with the unrelenting vigilance that six months of Jack Reynolds's careful defense had demanded of nearly every adult in town.

"I'm not asking anyone to stop believing what they believe," Ostrander told Daniel Brooks directly, in a private meeting the mayor had requested once the faction's size made it impossible to ignore. "I'm asking this town's leadership to consider whether Cain's peace, whatever its ultimate cost turns out to be, might actually be less costly than the war Jack Reynolds keeps preparing us to fight against a force we cannot realistically hope to defeat forever. Kane has a hundred and thirty men and growing state backing behind him now. We have a hundred and forty volunteers and a lot of faith. I respect the faith, Daniel. I've watched what it's done for people in this town I love. I just don't know if faith alone is going to be enough to keep my remaining family alive through whatever comes next."

Brooks did not dismiss the argument, understanding, from seven months of carrying decisions considerably heavier than any single mayor should ever have been asked to carry alone, exactly how much genuine grief and genuine fear lay underneath Ostrander's careful, reasonable-sounding case. "I hear you, Frank," he said. "I want you to know that. I don't think you're wrong that this path carries real risk — I've never once pretended otherwise, to you or to anyone else in this town. But I need you to hear what I believe just as clearly. I don't think Cain's peace is actually peace. I think it's a slower, gentler-looking version of exactly what Kane already showed us at Millbrook, and I believe surrendering our independence now buys this town nothing except a longer, quieter road to the same destination."

III. The Turnbulls

The division reached into individual families with a painful specificity that Rebecca found, more than any abstract political disagreement, the hardest single consequence of Ostrander's growing movement to watch unfold — and none more painfully than within the Turnbull household, where Kwame Turnbull, still grieving his daughter Ashley's death on County Road 17 six weeks earlier, found himself in open, anguished disagreement with his own wife, Adaeze, over exactly the question dividing the wider town.

"I watched my daughter die defending a principle," Kwame told Rebecca, sitting in her church office on a cold March afternoon, his voice carrying a raw, exhausted grief that had not fully healed and might, Rebecca understood, never fully heal. "I have started to wonder whether that principle was worth what it cost her. Adaeze thinks I'm betraying Ashley's memory even considering Ostrander's arguments. I think I'm the only one in my own house honest enough to ask whether her death actually accomplished anything lasting, or whether this town is just going to keep grinding up its children against Marcus Kane's army until there's nobody left to bury."

Rebecca listened without rushing to correct him, understanding, from months of sitting with exactly this kind of raw, unresolved grief, that Kwame's question deserved patience rather than a quick

theological rebuttal. "I don't think asking that question is a betrayal of Ashley's memory," she said carefully. "I think it's the most honest thing a grieving father could possibly do. I want to answer it as carefully as I know how, not to convince you of anything, but because I loved your daughter too, and I think she deserves an honest answer rather than an easy one." She opened her father's Bible to a passage she had been sitting with for weeks, anticipating, in some quiet way, exactly this conversation. "Hebrews eleven, verse twenty-five. Moses, described as choosing 'rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season.' I don't think Ashley died for an abstract principle, Kwame. I think she died protecting a specific, concrete kind of freedom — the freedom this whole town still has, right now, to gather in that sanctuary every single Sunday and say the name of Jesus Christ out loud without asking anyone's permission first. I believe, with everything I have, that the moment this town trades that freedom for Alexander Cain's promised safety, we lose something Ashley considered worth more than her own life to protect. I can't prove that to you in a way that makes her death hurt less. I can only tell you I believe it completely."

Kwame wept for a long time in her office that afternoon, and though he did not leave that conversation fully persuaded, he did not join Ostrander's growing faction either — a small, private victory that Rebecca counted, in the difficult weeks that followed, among the most important conversations of her entire ministry.

IV. What Sarah Feared Losing

Sarah Collins watched the growing division with a particular, personal dread that she confided only to Dana Pruitt, working alongside her one exhausted evening in the hospital's dwindling pharmacy. "Desmond Reyes isn't wrong about the resources," she admitted. "I've watched real people suffer real, preventable harm because this hospital doesn't have what a fully resourced system could provide. I understand exactly why families like his are tempted. I just don't know how to make peace with what I believe that temptation is actually going to cost them in the end."

Dana, whose own uncle Harold's deathbed conversion had first opened her own heart to faith seven months earlier, considered the dilemma with the same careful thoughtfulness she brought to every difficult case. "I think about Uncle Harold sometimes, when I hear Desmond talk that way," she said. "Seventy-nine years old, and he spent almost his whole life chasing exactly the kind of security Desmond's chasing now — enough money, enough comfort, enough certainty that nothing bad could touch him. It never once actually worked, not for him, not really. I don't think Cain's peace is going to work any better for Desmond's children than Uncle Harold's own careful planning worked for him. I think some kinds of safety were never actually available to buy, no matter how badly we want them to be."

Sarah nodded slowly, thinking of every patient she had lost that winter to shortages no fully stocked pharmacy would ever have permitted. "I keep praying God shows me how to hold both truths at once," she said. "That the suffering is real, and that the answer everyone's being offered for it is still the wrong one. I don't think I've fully figured out how to do that yet, Dana. I don't know if I ever will."

V. What Peter Ashby Discovered

It was Peter Ashby, still maintaining his careful network of contacts inside Kane's territory, who brought Jack Reynolds the intelligence that transformed Ostrander's growing faction from a painful but ordinary political disagreement into something considerably more dangerous.

"Kane's people are aware of Ostrander's movement," Peter reported, laying out what his contacts had confirmed over the previous two weeks. "More than aware, Jack. I have reason to believe money and supplies have already changed hands — not directly, nothing that traces back cleanly, but through intermediaries, traders who've been quietly funneling resources to Ostrander's faction to keep the pressure building from inside your own walls. Whitmore's exact words, according to my source, were that Ashwood doesn't need to be conquered from without if it can be convinced to surrender itself from within."

Jack absorbed this with the cold, focused clarity he brought to every confirmation of his own worst tactical fears. "That's exactly the seam I warned this council about back in December," he said. "I didn't expect it to open this specifically, or this fast. Frank Ostrander isn't a traitor, Peter — I want to be clear about that before we go any further. I believe the man is genuinely grieving, genuinely frightened, genuinely convinced he's protecting this town rather than endangering it. That makes this considerably harder to counter than if he were simply a paid agent, because everything he's saying to two hundred frightened neighbors is at least partially true. The casualties are real. The exhaustion is real. Kane's people don't need to invent a lie to exploit this seam. They just need to quietly amplify a truth this town was always going to have to grapple with eventually."

Daniel Brooks, hearing the intelligence, felt the particular exhaustion of a leader watching a threat he had specifically feared finally, exactly, materialize. "What do we do with this?" he asked. "I can't arrest Frank Ostrander for having an opinion, even a dangerous one. I won't build the kind of town that punishes disagreement with force — that's exactly the difference between what we're building and what Kane's already built."

"No," Jack agreed. "We don't meet this with force. We meet it the same way we've met every other threat since the vanishing began — honestly, and together, and with the truth laid out plainly enough that this town can make its own informed choice rather than a manipulated one."

VI. The Town Meeting

Daniel Brooks called a full town meeting for the last Sunday of March, held in the high school gymnasium where Ashwood's watch had first trained nearly seven months earlier, and it drew, by Lydia's careful count, close to eight thousand residents — the largest single gathering in the town's post-vanishing history, and the first, in seven months, where the crowd's mood carried a genuine, visible fracture rather than the hard-won unity that had carried Ashwood through every previous crisis.

Brooks opened the meeting with the same plain, unflinching honesty that had characterized every difficult announcement of his mayoralty, laying out Peter Ashby's intelligence before the full assembled crowd without softening a single uncomfortable detail. "I want every person in this room to make an informed choice tonight, not a manipulated one," he said. "Frank Ostrander's grief is real, and I respect

it, and I believe every person following him into this movement is doing so out of genuine, understandable exhaustion rather than any disloyalty to this town. But I need you to know that Marcus Kane's people are actively working to grow that movement, quietly, from outside our walls, because they understand something I need this whole town to understand tonight: they cannot break Ashwood from without nearly as easily as they can convince Ashwood to break itself from within."

Ostrander rose to speak when Brooks finished, and delivered, to a crowd considerably more divided than the confident audience of his own back-room gatherings, the same careful, grief-laden case he had made privately to Brooks weeks earlier — the mounting casualties, the exhausted watch rotations, the genuine uncertainty of a fight against a force Ashwood could not realistically expect to outlast forever. "I don't say any of this because I want Marcus Kane to win," he said, his voice carrying real emotion that Lydia noted, in her careful account, seemed entirely unfeigned. "I say it because I buried my nephew, and because I look around this room tonight and I see how many more of us are wearing black than were wearing it seven months ago, and I am asking this town, honestly, whether our principles are worth the price we keep paying for them, one grave at a time."

Desmond Reyes rose next, unwilling to let Ostrander's grief-laden appeal stand as the movement's only voice. "I want to say something more practical than what Frank's said," he told the crowd. "I don't doubt anyone's faith in this room. I doubt whether faith alone has ever fed a child in the history of the world without also needing bread to go with it. Cain's Council is already delivering real supplies to towns forty miles from here — I've seen the manifests myself, carried by traders who have no reason to lie about it. I'm not asking this town to renounce anything it believes. I'm asking it to be honest about whether principle is worth watching our own children go hungry for, when a reasonable alternative is sitting right in front of us."

A murmur of agreement rippled through a visible portion of the crowd, and Curtis Boyd, sitting near the front with the rest of the food council, rose unbidden to answer him directly. "I run this town's harvest, Desmond, same as I have all year," he said. "I won't pretend we haven't gone without. But I also won't pretend Cain's promised supplies are guaranteed, or free, or without a cost attached that none of us have fully seen yet. I'd rather go a little hungrier a little longer, knowing exactly what I'm trading for what I've got, than trade blind and find out too late exactly what the bill actually says."

Jack Reynolds spoke next, and his answer carried a weight that came, everyone in the gymnasium understood, from a man who had personally carried the cost of every single one of those graves more directly than almost anyone else in the room. "I loved every person we've buried this year," he said. "I trained most of them myself. I have sat with more grieving widows and grieving parents than I ever expected to sit with in this life, and I understand, better than most people in this room, exactly what Frank is describing when he talks about the cost of this fight." He paused, his voice steady despite the visible weight of the words. "But I want this town to understand something Marcus Kane already understands perfectly well, because he's built his entire strategy around it. Surrender doesn't end a war. It just changes which side gets to decide how the losses keep happening. Millbrook surrendered — no, Millbrook resisted and lost, and paid a price we've all heard about in painful detail. But Cedar Hollow submitted quietly, the way Frank is suggesting we consider, and Cedar Hollow lost its pastor to a system that decided his faith was too dangerous to leave unsupervised. I don't believe Alexander Cain's peace ends the cost this town is paying. I believe it simply moves that cost somewhere this town can't

see it as clearly anymore — into quiet arrests, into registration requirements, into exactly the kind of slow, patient strangulation Peter Ashby watched happen to his own father's church. I would rather this town keep paying its cost in the open, honestly, together, than trade it for a cost that only looks smaller because it's better hidden."

VII. What Rebecca Preached

Rebecca spoke last, standing before the largest and most divided crowd she had ever addressed in nine months of ministry, her father's Bible open to the passage she had chosen carefully, days in advance, understanding exactly how much weight this particular sermon would carry.

"First Kings, chapter eighteen," she said, her voice carrying clearly across a gymnasium gone silent with the particular attention of a town that understood, without being told, that this moment mattered more than almost any other moment in its short, remarkable history. "The prophet Elijah stands before all Israel, a nation that has spent years trying to worship both the true God and the false god Baal at the same time, hedging its loyalty, hoping to keep the benefits of both without fully committing to either. And Elijah asks them a question I believe this whole town needs to hear tonight, exactly as bluntly as he asked it then: 'How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him.'"

She looked out over the crowd, at faces she loved individually, faces marked by seven months of grief this town had carried together — Ostrander's followers on one side of the gymnasium, the watch and the Remnant gathered on the other, a fracture Rebecca could see plainly even from the small platform where she stood. "I am not going to stand here tonight and tell any of you that Frank Ostrander doesn't love this town, or doesn't grieve his nephew honestly, or is somehow less faithful than the rest of us for asking hard questions about the cost we keep paying. I think asking hard questions is one of the most faithful things a person can do, and I have asked plenty of my own across the last nine months." Her voice steadied, carrying the same settled conviction that had carried her through every difficult moment since her father's disappearance. "But I want to say, as plainly as Elijah said it to Israel, exactly what I believe with everything I have. Alexander Cain's peace is Baal's peace — a false god dressed in the language of rescue, promising safety in exchange for exactly the kind of worship that belongs to God alone. I do not believe this town can serve both. I do not believe we can keep our faith fully intact while quietly surrendering the independence that faith has always required to survive honestly in this world. Joshua told Israel the same thing, generations before Elijah ever stood on that mountain: choose you this day whom ye will serve. Not next year, once the cost becomes clearer. Not once Cain's true intentions finally reveal themselves beyond any doubt. Today. This town has to choose today, the same way every single person standing in this gymnasium eventually has to choose for themselves, whether the God who has carried us through nine impossible months is enough, or whether we've quietly decided, in our exhaustion, that we need something more than Him after all."

She closed her Bible and looked out over the silent, divided crowd one final time. "As for me and my house," she said, her voice carrying the full weight of Joshua's ancient declaration into a gymnasium in Ohio nine months into the end of the world as anyone gathered there had ever known it, "we will serve the Lord. Whatever that costs. However this town ultimately chooses tonight, I intend to still be

standing on this side of that choice when the true cost of Alexander Cain's peace finally comes due, the way I believe with everything in me it eventually will."

VIII. What Ashwood Chose

The meeting did not end in unanimous agreement, and Daniel Brooks, closing the gathering past midnight with a weariness that had settled permanently into his bones over nine impossible months, understood that it never could have — that a town of eighteen thousand people carrying nine months of accumulated grief was never going to arrive at a single, uncontested answer to a question this consequential.

Frank Ostrander left Ashwood eleven days later, along with roughly a hundred and forty residents who had come to share his conviction that Alexander Cain's system offered better odds of survival than continued independence — a departure that Daniel Brooks and the full council treated, at Rebecca's specific and deliberate insistence, not as a betrayal to be condemned but as a sorrowful, painful choice to be honored even in disagreement.

The morning they left was cold and gray, a thin April drizzle settling over a convoy of wagons and the handful of surviving vehicles Ostrander's faction had pooled together for the journey toward the nearest recognized Global Recovery Council checkpoint, thirty miles distant. Daniel Brooks stood at the checkpoint himself to see them off, shaking hands with neighbors he had known for decades, refusing, even in this, to let the moment become anything less than what he believed it truly was — a genuine loss, mourned honestly, rather than a rupture to be papered over with false cheer. Desmond Reyes shook Jack's hand last, his own eyes wet despite his best effort to hide it. "I don't think you're wrong, Reynolds," he admitted quietly. "I think I might just be more afraid than I'm willing to say out loud. I hope to God you're the one who turns out to be right about all this, even though I'm the one walking away."

Patricia Hale embraced Rebecca before she climbed into the wagon carrying her three children, weeping openly. "Keep praying for us," she said. "Whatever else changes, don't stop doing that."

"Every single Thursday," Rebecca promised her. "By name. For as long as it takes."

Frank Ostrander himself lingered longest, standing before Daniel Brooks with his hat in his hands the way men of an older generation still did at moments too weighty for easy words. "I know how this looks," he said. "I want you to know it isn't spite, Daniel. It was never spite. I just couldn't watch one more grave dug on my own conscience without trying something different."

"I know that, Frank," Brooks said, and embraced him, the two men holding the handshake a moment longer than strictly necessary. "The door stays open behind you. Every single day. I mean that as more than a courtesy."

"We are not Marcus Kane," Rebecca told the council, when some among them argued for stricter measures to prevent the departure. "We do not hold people against their will, and we do not treat honest disagreement as treason. If Frank and the families following him have genuinely, prayerfully concluded that this is the right choice for their own families, then our calling is to let them go in peace, to keep the

door open behind them, and to keep praying, every single Thursday, that whatever they find on the other side of that choice eventually leads them back to the truth rather than further from it."

The departure cost Ashwood dearly, in raw numbers alone — a hundred and forty fewer hands for the coming planting season, a hundred and forty fewer voices in a watch already stretched thin, a wound in the town's collective sense of itself that Lydia Hayes, recording the morning of their departure with the same careful, sorrowful precision she brought to every difficult chapter of Ashwood's history, described as "the first time this town has watched its own family walk away from it, rather than watching an enemy try to tear it away by force."

But something else happened in the days that followed the departure, something Daniel Brooks had not fully anticipated and that Rebecca, watching it unfold, recognized immediately as an answer to exactly the prayer she had been praying since the town meeting's difficult conclusion. The remaining town — smaller now, but considerably more unified than it had been in the anxious weeks before Ostrander's faction finally departed — gathered spontaneously at the church the following Sunday, filling the sanctuary beyond even its post-baptism capacity, and renewed, in a moment no one had formally planned or organized, the same covenant the Remnant's core had first spoken aloud four months earlier in the fellowship hall.

"I don't think we lost Frank Ostrander's people because this town failed them," Ethan told the gathered congregation that morning, standing beside Rebecca at the front of a sanctuary packed tighter than it had ever been. "I think we lost them because nine months of unrelenting grief finally cost this town exactly what grief always eventually costs anyone who carries it without the anchor Rebecca's been offering all of us since the very first week. I grieve that loss. I'm not going to pretend otherwise. But I look at everyone still standing in this room today, and I don't see a smaller, weaker Ashwood. I see a town that finally knows, without any doubt left in it, exactly which God it's actually serving — and I believe that clarity is going to matter more, in whatever's still coming for us, than a hundred and forty additional hands ever could have."

IX. What the Choosing Cost, and What It Bought

Lydia Hayes closed her account of that difficult March with words she would return to often, in the years ahead, as the truest summary of the hardest single month Ashwood endured that entire first year — harder, in its own quiet way, than even the bloodiest single morning on County Road 17, because this cost had come not from an enemy's bullet but from the town's own honest, exhausted, divided heart.

I watched this town lose a hundred and forty of its own this week, she wrote, *not to violence, not to Marcus Kane's raiders, but to its own accumulated grief, finally arriving at the conclusion that survival and faithfulness had become too expensive to hold together any longer. I do not condemn the families who left. I have sat with too much of this town's grief myself, across nine impossible months, to pretend I fully understand what it costs a person to keep choosing faithfulness over safety, week after week, without ever once being permitted the relief of simply putting the burden down. But I watched something else happen in the days after they left — a town that had spent weeks quietly fracturing*

suddenly, unmistakably clarify itself, the way a wound sometimes has to fully open before it can finally, properly heal. Joshua asked Israel to choose whom they would serve, on the very threshold of a promised land they had not yet fully claimed. I believe Ashwood asked itself the same question this March, on the threshold of a war it has not yet fully fought, and I believe, watching the answer settle over this town in the week since, that whatever cost is still ahead of us, we are facing it now as a people who finally, fully know which God we belong to — and I do not believe, whatever else this difficult spring has cost us, that clarity was ever a bad trade to make.

Daniel Brooks stood once more beneath the old Civil War cannon that evening, the same spot where he had first addressed a shocked and grieving crowd nine months earlier, and found himself thinking, watching the sun set over a town smaller and more sharply defined than it had been that first terrible night, of a passage Rebecca had shared with him privately just that week, from the sixth chapter of Galatians. *"And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not."* He did not know, standing there in the fading light, exactly what season Ashwood was still walking toward, or how much further the road to that reaping still stretched ahead of them. He knew only that the town behind him, smaller now by a hundred and forty souls, had chosen, this difficult spring, not to faint — and he intended, with whatever strength his own tired body and tired faith still had left to give, to keep walking beside it for as long as that choice was asked of him.

Outside, the last of the March snow finally began to melt across fields that would, within weeks, need every remaining hand Ashwood still possessed to plant the crop that would carry the town through whatever winter still lay ahead — a smaller town now than it had been a month earlier, but a town that had chosen, deliberately and at real cost, exactly whom it intended to serve, whatever the coming season still demanded of that choice.

ASHES OF AMERICA — BOOK ONE AFTER THE VANISHING by Dr. Paul Crawford

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Winter Is Coming

"While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease." — Genesis 8:22 (KJV)

"But pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the sabbath day." — Matthew 24:20 (KJV)

I. The Second Harvest

The corn came in heavy that September, fourteen months after the vanishing, across fields that Curtis Boyd and the food council's eleven contributing farms had worked with a discipline and a hard-won expertise that bore almost no resemblance to the frightened, improvised planting of the previous spring.

Ashwood had learned, across a full turning of the seasons, exactly what its own survival actually required — how much grain to hold in reserve against a hard winter, how to properly cure and store meat without the refrigeration none of them had possessed in over a year, how to stretch a diminished harvest across a population that had grown, shrunk, and grown again through waves of refugees and, in the difficult spring, the sorrowful departure of Frank Ostrander's hundred and forty. The town's remaining population, Daniel Brooks's careful count now put at just over nineteen thousand souls, was smaller than it had been at its peak the previous winter, but it was, in every practical measure that mattered, considerably better prepared to survive the season now closing in around it.

Sarah Collins had spent the summer months building a medical stockpile she had once only dreamed of possessing — supplementing the hospital's dwindling manufactured medications with a careful, methodical program of herbal and natural remedies she had researched from salvaged pharmacology texts, training a growing corps of volunteer nurses in exactly the kind of low-tech, resourceful medicine that a world without pharmaceutical manufacturing now required of every physician still standing. Jack Reynolds had spent the same months hardening the watch's winter readiness — insulated watchtower shelters, cold-weather rotation schedules that protected volunteers from the kind of exposure that had nearly claimed two lives during the previous January's coldest week, a careful stockpile of firewood and fuel that the food council had prioritized alongside the harvest itself.

Curtis Boyd stood before the food council's own gathering the week the harvest finished, a much older man in bearing than the plainspoken farmer who had first offered his fields to the town's use fourteen months earlier, and delivered a report considerably more encouraging than any he had given in the difficult months following Otis Vance's death. "We brought in enough this year to carry every household in this town through winter at a full ration, not the starvation lines we were running last year," he said. "We've got surplus enough, if we're careful, to keep supporting the Refuge camp fully and still hold a reserve against a bad spring. I don't say that to make anybody complacent. I say it because this town worked itself half to death to earn this harvest, and I think it's worth taking one evening to actually feel the weight of what we managed to build instead of just moving straight on to worrying about what's still coming for us."

"We are not the town we were last September," Jack told the council, presenting his final autumn readiness report in the same fellowship hall where so many of Ashwood's hardest decisions had been made. "Last year we were improvising against a catastrophe none of us had any preparation for. This year we are executing a plan built from fourteen months of hard, costly experience. That doesn't mean this winter is going to be easy. I don't believe it is. But I believe we are meeting it as a considerably stronger town than the one that buried Otis Vance over eighty pounds of grain, and I intend to make sure that strength holds all the way through to spring."

II. What Grew Harder

The improved preparation did not mean the coming winter carried no new dangers, and Daniel Brooks, reviewing the full picture with his council in the first cold week of October, understood that in several critical respects, this second winter threatened to prove considerably more dangerous than the first.

Marcus Kane's forces, formally recognized now as the "stabilized regional authority" under Alexander Cain's Global Recovery Council, had grown through the summer to a strength Peter Ashby's careful, ongoing intelligence now placed at close to two hundred trained men, supplemented by equipment and resources flowing steadily from Cain's own expanding logistics network — a level of support that transformed Kane from a dangerous regional warlord into something considerably closer to an occupying force operating with the tacit approval of whatever remained of organized global authority.

"He hasn't moved against us directly since the ambush on County Road 17," Jack reported, laying out the full strategic picture with the same careful precision he brought to every briefing. "I don't believe that's mercy, or hesitation. I believe Kane and Cain's people together have concluded that a slow, patient siege — cutting off our trade routes, isolating us from Danforth and every other independent community, waiting for exactly the kind of internal fracture Frank Ostrander's departure already proved is possible — costs them considerably less than another direct assault that might cost them as dearly as the ambush already did. Winter plays directly into that strategy. Cold, scarcity, isolation — every one of those pressures works in Kane's favor without him having to fire a single additional shot."

Ethan Walker, who had spent the past year folding what remained of his old police department fully into Jack's defense structure, added his own sober assessment to the council's growing unease. "I've watched three different independent communities within radio range of us formally join Cain's Council this fall alone," he said. "Every one of them cited the same reasoning — winter coming, resources tight, an offer of help too costly to keep refusing. I don't judge any of them for that choice, the same way this council chose not to judge Frank Ostrander's people last spring. But every community that joins makes Ashwood and Danforth's continued independence more conspicuous, not less. We're not simply holding out against Kane anymore. We're becoming, in the eyes of Cain's whole growing system, the visible proof that independence is still possible at all — and I don't believe a system built the way this one is built can afford to let that proof keep standing indefinitely."

Sylvia Marchetti, joining the council by radio from Danforth, confirmed the grim assessment from her own town's perspective. "We're seeing the same pressure," she said. "Trade routes we used to run freely are getting harder to use without running directly through territory Kane's people now formally control. I don't think either of our towns starves this winter, Daniel. I think we both go considerably hungrier than we would have gone a year ago, and I think that's exactly the outcome Kane and his new masters are counting on."

III. What the Cold Took

The first serious test of Ashwood's improved preparation arrived in the second week of November, when an early, brutal cold snap swept through the region days ahead of anything the season had produced the previous year, catching a portion of the town's most vulnerable residents — the elderly, the very young, families still living in inadequately insulated shelters at the fairground Refuge — in conditions that strained even Sarah's carefully rebuilt medical capacity.

She lost two patients that week — an elderly widower named Elmer Castile, whose weakened heart could not withstand the sudden temperature drop despite every intervention her stockpiled resources

could offer, and a six-month-old infant born at the Refuge camp that spring, whose fragile lungs succumbed to a respiratory illness that swept quickly through the camp's crowded winter quarters before Sarah's quarantine protocols could fully contain it.

The illness that claimed the infant's life spread quickly through the Refuge's crowded winter quarters before Sarah's careful quarantine protocols finally contained it, sickening nearly forty residents in the space of five days and testing, in the most direct way yet, the resilience of the mass-casualty and infectious-disease response Sarah had spent the previous year quietly building. She worked alongside Dana Pruitt and a dozen volunteer nurses around the clock for the better part of a week, separating the sick from the well, rationing what little of the hospital's antibiotic stock remained for the cases severe enough to require it, and found herself, more than once during that exhausting stretch, praying the same simple, exhausted prayer over and over as she moved from cot to cot: *Lord, let this be enough. Let what we've built be enough.*

It very nearly was. Of the forty stricken, thirty-eight recovered fully within two weeks, a survival rate that Sarah understood, with the clear-eyed honesty of a physician who had once believed only in what could be measured, would have been unthinkable in the chaotic, unprepared conditions of the previous winter — proof, however cold a comfort it offered against the two losses she could not prevent, that a full year of hard, careful preparation had bought this town something real.

She sat with the infant's mother, a young refugee widow named Talia Voss who had walked to Ashwood from the ruins of a town further south the previous winter, in the hospital's small family room, and found herself, fourteen months into a ministry of grief she had never once expected her medical training to require of her, still without any easy words adequate to the moment.

"I don't understand why He would let this happen," Talia said, her voice hollow with a grief too fresh to have found any shape yet beyond raw disbelief. "I walked two hundred miles to bring her somewhere safe. I did everything right. I trusted God to protect her, the way your church taught me to trust Him, and He let her die anyway, in a hospital, surrounded by people trying to save her."

Sarah held the young mother's hands, thinking of Lamentations, chapter three, a passage she had returned to often across fourteen months of exactly this kind of grief. "I don't have an answer that makes this hurt less, Talia," she said honestly. "I wish I did. I've sat with too much loss this year to pretend I've found a formula that makes it bearable. But I want to tell you something I've come to believe with everything I have, even on the hardest nights, even tonight. 'It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness.' I don't believe God caused this. I believe we live in a broken world that takes things from all of us that we never should have had to lose, your daughter included. But I believe His mercy is still new every single morning, even the mornings that start exactly like this one, and I intend to keep believing that, walking beside you, for as long as it takes you to find your own way back to believing it too."

IV. The Thanksgiving

Daniel Brooks called for a formal day of thanksgiving on the last Thursday of November, a full year and four months after the vanishing, and the gathering that assembled in the church sanctuary that morning — the largest since the mass baptism and the tense town meeting that had split the town in the spring — carried a character unlike any previous gathering in Ashwood's difficult post-vanishing history: not crisis, not grief freshly delivered, but a deliberate, communal pause to take stock of exactly how far the town had traveled since an ordinary Tuesday afternoon had ended forever.

Rebecca stood before the packed sanctuary with her father's Bible open to Philippians, chapter four, a passage she had chosen carefully in the weeks leading up to the gathering. *"Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content,"* she read. *"I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."*

"I want to do something a little different this morning," she said, closing the Bible. "I want to ask some of you to stand and tell this congregation, briefly, what you're grateful for this year — not despite everything this town has survived, but sometimes, I think, precisely because of it. I believe gratitude tested by genuine hardship means something considerably more than gratitude that's never had to survive anything at all."

Ethan Walker stood first, Emily's Bible in hand as it so often was now. "A year ago I lost my wife and daughter in a single afternoon and spent the following months telling myself I didn't believe in anything that could explain it," he said. "I am grateful, this Thanksgiving, for every single person in this room who was patient enough to keep loving me while I found my way to believing what Emily always knew. I am grateful I get to spend eternity with both of them, instead of the alternative I was convinced was the only truth available to me fourteen months ago."

Jack Reynolds stood next, his composure carrying the same settled steadiness that had carried this town through every crisis since the Boyd farm shooting. "I am grateful for the men and women I've had the privilege of training and serving beside this year," he said, "including the ones we buried on County Road 17, whose sacrifice I intend to carry faithfully for whatever years I have left. I am grateful, more than I know how to properly express, that God finally, patiently, wore down eleven years of my own stubborn resistance and gave me a family in this town I never expected to find again after everything I lost overseas."

Noah Simmons stood, eighteen years old now, carrying himself with a settled maturity that startled Rebecca every time she watched him address a room. "I lost both my parents the same afternoon everyone else in this town lost someone," he said. "I am grateful this year for a stranger who gave me a Bible in a dark churchyard when I had nothing else left, and for a whole town full of people who taught me, one hard lesson at a time, exactly what it actually means to be somebody's family when your own is gone."

Melissa Danvers stood next, her two children beside her, and the sanctuary fell especially quiet for her words, every person present understanding exactly what the last fourteen months had cost her family. "I am grateful my husband died a free man, protecting people he loved, rather than living a long life inside whatever cage Marcus Kane would eventually have built around him," she said. "I did not

expect, a year ago, that I would ever be able to say that sentence without my voice breaking. I can say it steady today, and I believe that steadiness is its own kind of miracle."

Denise Marsh, who had lost both a husband and a daughter before this whole ordeal even began, stood with the quiet, settled composure that had made her one of the watch's most respected sector captains. "I buried my little girl's shoes instead of her body," she said. "I have spent this whole year learning that grief and gratitude can live in the very same heart without canceling each other out. I am grateful for every single family in this sanctuary who let me love their children this year, the way I would have loved my own Sophie if she'd been given the years the rest of us are still fighting for."

Peter Ashby, who had crossed into Ashwood in the dead of a bitter December night nearly a year earlier, stood last among the unplanned testimonies, his voice carrying the particular gratitude of a man who understood better than almost anyone in that sanctuary exactly what the alternative to Ashwood's welcome might have cost him. "I left my father and sister behind a system I couldn't protect them from," he said. "I am grateful, every single day, for a town that took in a stranger who had worn the very uniform some of you buried loved ones fighting against, and never once asked me to earn my place among you before extending it freely."

Grant Sowell stood last among the volunteers, his voice steady despite the visible emotion behind it. "I spent two years angry at a God I told myself might not even exist," he said. "I am grateful this Thanksgiving for a patient, honest congregation that let me argue my way toward faith instead of demanding I simply accept it, and for the daughter I believe, with everything I now have, that I am going to see again someday, in a place considerably safer than anywhere Alexander Cain has ever promised to build."

V. What Peter Ashby Warned

The council's mood, still warm from the Thanksgiving gathering, cooled considerably in the first week of December, when Peter Ashby brought Jack Reynolds intelligence that confirmed the grim strategic assessment the two men had shared back in October.

"Kane's planning something for spring," Peter reported, laying out what his careful, ongoing network had confirmed. "Not another probe. A full mobilization, coordinated with resources Cain's Council is apparently prepared to commit directly — equipment, additional trained personnel, air reconnaissance if the rumors about restored aircraft capacity in some of the larger recovery zones turn out to be accurate. Whitmore's been telling the men this whole winter is preparation, not patience. Kane intends to end Ashwood's independence permanently once the ground firms up enough for a full assault, and he intends to do it with enough force this time that there's no repeat of what happened on County Road 17."

Jack absorbed this with the same cold, disciplined clarity he brought to every confirmation of his darkest strategic fears. "How much time do we have?"

"My best estimate, based on everything I've gathered, is late April or early May," Peter said. "Once the roads are reliably clear and the ground's dry enough to move heavy equipment. That gives you roughly five months to prepare for something considerably larger than anything this town has faced yet."

Daniel Brooks received the report with the particular weariness of a man who had hoped, across a full year of hard-won stability, that the worst of Ashwood's trials might finally be behind it rather than still gathering ahead. "Five months," he said quietly. "Jack, can we be ready?"

"I don't know," Jack said honestly, refusing, even in the face of the mayor's evident need for reassurance, to offer comfort he could not fully stand behind. "I know we're going to spend every one of those five months trying. I know this town has already proven, more than once, that it's capable of building things considerably stronger and considerably faster than anyone would have believed possible fourteen months ago. I don't have a guarantee to offer you, Mayor. I have everything I've got left to give toward making sure whatever guarantee we do end up with is the best one this town's own hard work can possibly build."

VI. The Second Christmas

Ashwood observed its second Christmas since the vanishing on a clear, bitterly cold morning in late December, the sanctuary of Ashwood Community Baptist Church filled to a capacity that rivaled even the Thanksgiving gathering four weeks earlier — a congregation that understood, without needing to be told, exactly how much weight this particular Christmas carried, coming as it did in the shadow of Peter Ashby's grim warning and the five uncertain months still stretching ahead of them.

Rebecca preached that morning from Isaiah, chapter nine, a passage her father had preached every single Christmas of his thirty-one-year ministry, and one she had saved, this year, for a congregation that needed its promise more urgently than any congregation her father had ever addressed. *"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."*

"I want to say something about that word 'government' this morning," she told the packed sanctuary, "because I think it matters more this Christmas than it has mattered in a very long time. This whole broken world has spent the last ten months watching a man named Alexander Cain build a government promising exactly the peace this verse promises — and I believe, with everything I have, that his promise is a counterfeit of something considerably older, considerably truer, and considerably more costly to receive. The government Isaiah describes wasn't built through conquest, or through carefully worded broadcasts, or through the slow, patient absorption of frightened, exhausted towns. It was built through a baby born in a stable, in the middle of an occupied, oppressed nation not so different from the broken world we're living in right now, because the real Prince of Peace never once intended to arrive through the mechanisms of earthly power. He intended to arrive through humility, through sacrifice, through a cross that looked, to everyone watching it happen, like the exact opposite of victory."

She looked out over the congregation — refugees who had walked hundreds of miles to reach this sanctuary, watch volunteers who had buried their own beside County Road 17, farmers who had spent a full year learning to coax a harvest out of ground that had never needed to feed a town so completely on its own before, children born into a world none of their parents would have chosen for them. "Marcus Kane is coming for this town in the spring," she said, her voice carrying the same settled,

unflinching honesty that had carried this congregation through every hard truth of the past fourteen months. "I'm not going to pretend otherwise on Christmas morning, because I don't believe my father would have wanted me to comfort you with anything less than the truth. But I believe the same God who sent His own Son into an occupied, frightened, broken world two thousand years ago is not finished writing this town's story yet, whatever the coming months still hold. Immanuel. God with us. Not God who fixes every hard thing before it happens. God with us, in the middle of every hard thing, the same way He's been with this town through every single day of the fourteen impossible months since the world we all used to know came to an end."

The congregation sang "O Little Town of Bethlehem" a cappella that morning, the hospital's small collection of surviving hymnals passed hand to hand among a crowd too large for the church's own supply to fully cover, and Sarah Collins, standing near the back beside Dana Pruitt, found herself weeping through most of the final verse, thinking of Talia Voss's infant daughter, of Otis Vance, of Curtis Danvers and Sam Kessler and Ashley Turnbull, of every grave that now stood in the small church cemetery behind the building where this congregation now sang — and thinking, too, of the strange, stubborn hope that had carried this entire broken, grieving town all the way to this particular cold, clear December morning, still singing, still gathered, still unmistakably, defiantly alive.

VII. What Jack Prepared

The five months between Christmas and the spring Peter Ashby's intelligence had marked as Kane's likely deadline unfolded, for Jack Reynolds, into the most intensive period of preparation Ashwood's defense had undergone since the very first frantic weeks after the vanishing.

He expanded the watch's rotation to nearly two hundred trained volunteers, drawing on a full year of accumulated experience to build a training program considerably more sophisticated than anything the town's early, improvised defenses had managed. He worked with Harlan Voss to reinforce the watchtowers against the kind of coordinated assault Peter's intelligence suggested Kane now intended to bring, adding fallback trench lines and concealed secondary firing positions at every sector, lessons drawn directly and deliberately from the specific ways County Road 17 had nearly overwhelmed his defenses the year before. He worked with Sylvia Marchetti's own growing forces to build a genuine, coordinated joint defense plan between Ashwood and Danforth — two towns that had, over a full year of shared hardship, become considerably more than mere trading partners — running joint drills every month through the coldest stretch of winter, refining a shared communication protocol robust enough to coordinate a combined response within minutes rather than the hours such coordination would have required a year earlier.

He also did something he had never once done in eleven years of military service, and had come, across a full year of Ashwood's difficult ministry, to consider every bit as essential as any tactical preparation: he asked Rebecca to build a chaplaincy program directly into the watch's own structure, training a dozen volunteers from the Remnant to walk the perimeter alongside armed patrols, offering prayer and simple presence to volunteers carrying a weight Jack understood, from his own hard years, no tactical training alone could ever fully prepare a person to bear. "A watchman needs more than a rifle to hold a line through a hard winter and a harder spring," he told Rebecca, when he first proposed it. "I learned

that the hard way, a long time before I ever came home to this town. I don't intend to let the volunteers under my command learn it the same way I did, not if there's anything I can do to spare them."

"Psalm one hundred twenty-one," Walt Henderson quoted to him one bitter February evening, the two men sharing their now-familiar porch ritual even in the depths of the coldest month of the year. *"I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth. He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber... The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore."*

"I've spent five months building every physical defense I know how to build," Jack told him. "I still don't know if it's going to be enough against what's actually coming for us."

"It never fully is, son," Walt said. "That's not a reason to stop building it. It's the reason the psalm doesn't say the hills themselves are your help. It says your help comes from the One who made the hills in the first place. Keep building everything this town needs you to build, Jack. Just don't mistake the building itself for the actual source of whatever safety this town ends up finding when spring finally arrives."

VIII. What Still Stood

Lydia Hayes closed her account of that long, difficult winter with words she would return to often in the years that followed, as Ashwood's second full winter finally gave way to the first thaw of a spring that everyone in town understood, without needing to be told, would bring with it the hardest test the community had yet faced.

Fourteen months ago, I stood in a town square watching a mayor tell a shocked, grieving crowd that no one was coming to save them, she wrote. *I have spent this second winter watching that same town — smaller now, scarred now, considerably more battle-tested now than it was that first terrible night — prove, in a hundred small and costly ways, exactly what it meant to take that mayor's words seriously and build a life worth living out of them anyway. We buried more of our own this winter than any winter should ever require a community our size to bury. We watched a false peace rise on the world stage, promising rescue at a price this town has decided, deliberately and at real cost, it is not willing to pay. And we watched, even in the depths of the coldest, hardest months, a congregation gather to sing an old carol about a little town not so different from our own, trusting a God who arrived, the first time, in circumstances every bit as broken and every bit as uncertain as the ones this town now finds itself facing.*

Genesis eight, verse twenty-two, promises that seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, shall not cease while the earth remains. I have watched that promise hold true, in its own hard way, across this entire impossible year — the seasons turning faithfully around us regardless of how much grief or fear accompanied their turning. I do not know what the coming spring will finally bring to Ashwood, Ohio. I know only that whatever it brings, this town intends to meet it the same way it has met everything else since an ordinary Tuesday afternoon ended forever: together, faithfully, and with considerably more courage than any of us ever believed we possessed before the world first taught us we would need it.

Rebecca stood at her father's grave marker one final time before the thaw fully arrived, the small stone she and the congregation had placed in the cemetery the previous autumn — a memorial rather than a grave, since there had been no body left to bury, only an empty chair and a pair of folded glasses — and found herself thinking, standing there in the last cold of that long winter, of everything the past fourteen months had asked of her that she never could have imagined shouldering on the ordinary Tuesday afternoon when this whole impossible story began. She had buried strangers who became family. She had watched a whole town choose faith over fear, again and again, at costs she still could not fully reckon even now. She had inherited a ministry she had never once sought, and had carried it, imperfectly but faithfully, all the way to this cold, uncertain spring morning, standing over a memorial to a father whose voice, she understood now with total certainty, would go on preaching long after whatever came for Ashwood in the weeks ahead.

"I don't know what's coming, Dad," she said quietly, to the small stone marker, to the empty air, to the God she now trusted more completely than she had ever trusted anything in her life before the vanishing took him from her. "I know this town is more ready than it's ever been. I know some of us aren't going to survive whatever Marcus Kane finally brings against us this spring. I know you'd tell me that readiness was never really about the watchtowers or the training or even the harvest, though I believe you'd be proud of every bit of it. I think you'd tell me it was always about this — a whole town, gathered under one roof on a bitter Christmas morning, still singing, still trusting, still certain that whatever earthly government rises against us, the real one already came, two thousand years ago, in a manger in an occupied land not so different from our own. I believe that today more than I've believed anything in my whole life. I intend to keep believing it, whatever the spring finally costs us."

Outside, the last snow of that long, hard winter began finally to melt across watchtowers manned through every bitter night since November, across a church whose broadcast now reached, by Frank Pelletier's careful count, more than twenty communities scattered across the wounded landscape of a broken nation, across a small church cemetery where the graves of Otis Vance, Curtis Danvers, Sam Kessler, Ashley Turnbull, Elmer Castile, and a nameless infant lay waiting beneath ground that would, within weeks, be green again — and forty miles east, in a headquarters flush with new resources and new authority, Marcus Kane studied a map of Ashwood's defenses with the same cold, patient calculation he had brought to every decision since the vanishing began, counting down the final weeks until the ground firmed up enough to finally, fully settle the question that had hung over both towns for a full and costly year.

ASHES OF AMERICA — BOOK ONE AFTER THE VANISHING by Dr. Paul Crawford

CHAPTER TWENTY

After the Vanishing

"All these are the beginning of sorrows." — Matthew 24:8 (KJV)

"Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat... Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation." — Habakkuk 3:17–18 (KJV)

I. What May Brought

Marcus Kane's assault came in the first week of May, exactly as Peter Ashby's careful intelligence had warned it would — nearly two hundred and forty men moving against Ashwood's eastern and northern sectors simultaneously, backed by equipment and coordination considerably beyond anything the town had faced before, in the largest and most dangerous single engagement of the entire war.

It very nearly worked. Jack Reynolds would say so himself, in the after-action account he gave the council three days later, his voice carrying the particular exhaustion of a man who had spent seventy-two consecutive hours holding a line he was not fully certain, in the assault's darkest hour, would actually hold. The eastern watchtower fell briefly before dawn on the second day, overrun by a coordinated push that cost the watch four more of its own before Jack's quick-reaction force, reinforced by Sylvia Marchetti's arriving Danforth militia — summoned by radio the moment the assault began, and arriving, after a hard forced march, in exactly the narrow window that made the difference between a costly victory and total catastrophe — retook the position in a counterattack that Lydia Hayes would later describe, in the careful, thorough account she compiled for her growing history, as the single most consequential hour of Ashwood's entire post-vanishing existence.

Kane himself withdrew his remaining forces on the third morning, having lost, by Jack's best count, close to sixty men against Ashwood and Danforth's combined defense — a cost considerably higher than even the ambush on County Road 17 had extracted, and one that Peter Ashby's continuing intelligence confirmed, in the weeks that followed, had cost Marcus Kane something he valued even more than the men themselves: the confidence of Alexander Cain's Global Recovery Council, which had committed real resources to an assault that had failed to deliver the swift, decisive victory it had been promised.

Ashwood buried seven more of its own that May, names that joined Otis Vance and Curtis Danvers and Sam Kessler and Ashley Turnbull and Elmer Castile in the small, steadily growing corner of ground behind Ashwood Community Baptist Church — a cost that Daniel Brooks, standing at the graveside of the seventh burial in a single terrible week, understood the town would carry for the rest of its history, whatever else the future still held. But Ashwood held. Marcus Kane withdrew rather than pressed the assault to its final, costliest conclusion, and the uneasy, watchful peace that settled over the contested border between the two territories in the weeks that followed carried, everyone on both sides of it understood, the particular fragility of a conflict merely paused rather than genuinely resolved.

Jack Reynolds walked the eastern watchtower's shattered upper platform the morning after the retaking, running his hand along scorched, splintered timber that Ashwood's own carpenters would spend the better part of two weeks rebuilding, and found himself thinking, unexpectedly, of Nehemiah — a man he had never once thought of before the vanishing, but whose story Walt Henderson had read aloud to him more evenings than he could now count, huddled together over a Bible in Walt's small kitchen

while the rest of the exhausted watch slept. *"So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work."* He understood, standing on that broken platform with the morning sun rising cold and pale over ground three of his own men had bled on two nights earlier, exactly why that verse had stayed with him. Nehemiah had rebuilt Jerusalem's wall with a trowel in one hand and a sword in the other, watching for the enemy even as the work itself continued — and Jack understood, in a way he could not have understood before two years of exactly that same discipline, that Ashwood's whole existence since the vanishing had followed precisely that same pattern: build, watch, build again, never once permitted the luxury of choosing only one task at a time.

Sylvia Marchetti stayed three additional days after the assault's end, meeting personally with Jack and Daniel Brooks both to formalize an arrangement that had, until that costly week, remained an informal understanding between two towns that trusted each other but had never fully committed their mutual defense to paper. "Danforth and Ashwood stand together from here forward," she told the assembled council, her voice carrying the same blunt, unadorned authority Jack had come to respect in her since their first meeting more than a year earlier. "Not as allies who happen to share an interest. As one line, however many miles apart our own two town halls happen to sit. Whatever Marcus Kane sends against either one of us in the future, he sends against both." Daniel Brooks signed the formal mutual-defense compact that same afternoon, understanding, as he set his own name beside Sylvia's on a single sheet of paper that represented, in its own quiet way, the closest thing to a treaty either surviving town had negotiated since the collapse of the federal government they had once lived beneath, that Ashwood's survival had stopped being, if it had ever truly been, a story about one town's stubborn faith alone. It had become, in the two years since Caleb Whitfield's disappearance, a story about an entire faithful network of towns and farms and radio stations, scattered but bound together, refusing in concert what none of them could have successfully refused alone.

II. What the Summer Rebuilt

The months that followed brought Ashwood something it had not experienced since the earliest days before the vanishing: a season, however uneasy, without the immediate pressure of an active, gathering threat bearing down on its own doorstep.

The corn grew tall through a summer that felt, to residents who allowed themselves the rare luxury of noticing it, almost ordinary in its rhythms — planting, tending, the long slow work of a harvest that would carry the town through its third winter. Sarah Collins spent the season training a fuller complement of medical volunteers, building a program of instruction thorough enough that she began, quietly and with considerable pride, to call several of her most capable trainees something closer to junior physicians than mere first-aid volunteers. Jack Reynolds spent the season in the unfamiliar rhythm of maintenance rather than crisis, refining the defense structure that had held against Kane's spring assault, training new recruits to replace the seven graves the town had dug in May, and finding, in the relative quiet, more time than he had allowed himself in nearly two years to simply sit on Walt Henderson's porch and let his own faith continue its slow, steady deepening.

Rebecca's ministry grew that summer in ways that would have seemed, to the grieving, searching woman who had first watched her father's recorded message alone in his darkened study two years

earlier, almost impossible to believe. Frank Pelletier's broadcast now reached, by his own careful count, more than thirty communities scattered across the wounded landscape of what had once been the American Midwest, and Rebecca had begun, that summer, training a small circle of the Remnant's own members — Dana Pruitt, Peter Ashby, and, to her own quiet astonishment, Grant Sowell — to carry portions of the teaching ministry themselves, understanding that whatever time remained before Marcus Kane's forces, or Alexander Cain's growing authority, or some entirely new trial none of them yet anticipated finally tested Ashwood again, the work could not remain dependent on any single voice, her own included.

"My father built this the same way," she told Grant, the week she asked him to begin leading a portion of the Thursday gatherings himself. "Sermon notes, recordings, a whole life's ministry designed to keep speaking even after he could no longer speak it himself. I think the most faithful thing I can do with what he left me isn't to keep carrying it alone forever. It's to make sure it keeps multiplying, the way he always intended it to, long after I'm not the only one standing at the front of that sanctuary."

Grant Sowell's own transformation across that second summer remained, to nearly everyone who had known him before the vanishing, the single hardest miracle in Ashwood's whole remarkable story to fully believe. The man who had once run the county's most profitable pawn shop with an eye toward his own advantage alone, who had hesitated for months even after his own quiet conversion to fully commit himself to the Remnant's exposed and dangerous gatherings, stood that August in front of nearly sixty people at a Thursday meeting and testified, in a voice that cracked more than once, to exactly what two years of watching Rebecca Whitfield's faithfulness had finally worn down in him.

"I used to believe the whole world ran on what a man could take for himself before somebody else took it first," he told the gathered circle, Caleb Whitfield's own worn Bible — the one Rebecca had lent him for his own private study, and which he had never once returned, not because he forgot but because Rebecca had told him plainly to keep it — open in his hands. "I ran my shop that way for fifteen years and told myself it was just good business. I watched this town nearly tear itself apart in the first weeks after the vanishing, watched Marcus Kane build an entire kingdom on exactly the philosophy I used to live by, and it took losing almost everything I had left to finally understand what Pastor Whitfield's recordings were actually trying to tell me all along. First Timothy, chapter six: *'For the love of money is the root of all evil.'* Not money itself. The love of it. The willingness to build your whole life around taking rather than giving. I spent fifty years building exactly that kind of life, and I have spent these last two years, slowly and often badly, trying to build something considerably better in its place." He closed the Bible gently. "I don't know how many years I have left to keep making up for the first fifty. I intend to spend every one of them I'm given trying."

III. What Grew Beyond Ashwood's Borders

Lydia Hayes spent that same summer expanding her own work considerably beyond the boundaries of Ashwood's own difficult history, using the growing network of traders, travelers, and Frank Pelletier's ever-strengthening radio contacts to build, for the first time since the vanishing, something approaching a genuine picture of the wider, transformed world beyond Richland County's own borders.

What she found troubled her more deeply than anything she had documented since the earliest, most chaotic weeks of the collapse. Alexander Cain's Global Recovery Council, having spent its first year consolidating authority through the careful combination of genuine humanitarian relief and quiet, patient coercion that Ashwood's own leadership had recognized and resisted from the very first broadcast, had grown, by that second summer, into something considerably more total than the loose coalition it had first presented itself as being. Cain had reorganized the surviving structure of global governance into ten administrative regions, each overseen by a regional authority answerable directly to his own expanding office — a structure Lydia found, cross-referencing it against Rebecca's careful study of Scripture, matching with unsettling precision the prophecy of Revelation, chapter seventeen, that Rebecca had shared with her months earlier: *"And the ten horns which thou sawest are ten kings, which have received no kingdom as yet; but receive power as kings one hour with the beast. These have one mind, and shall give their power and strength unto the beast."*

Registration requirements, once limited to the kind of careful oversight of religious gatherings that had cost Miriam Castellano's own pastor his freedom in Cedar Hollow, had expanded, across Cain's growing regional structure, into something considerably more comprehensive — a proposed system of universal identification and resource allocation that Cain's broadcasts described, in the same warm, measured language that had characterized every announcement since his first, as a practical necessity for coordinating relief fairly across a still-recovering world. Communities that had joined the Council early, hoping for the security and provision his broadcasts had promised, found themselves, eighteen months later, operating under a supervision considerably more total than anything they had initially agreed to — a pattern Lydia documented, town by town, with the same careful, methodical thoroughness she brought to every difficult chapter of the history she now understood, with growing certainty, extended far beyond the boundaries of any single Ohio town's story.

"I don't believe we've seen the full shape of what's coming yet," she told Rebecca, the two of them reviewing her research together in the church office on a warm July evening. "I believe what we watched Alexander Cain build in his first year was only the foundation. I don't know what he intends to build on top of it. I know your father's own sermon notes, and everything Scripture has told us to watch for, suggest we are only at the very beginning of understanding exactly how much this world is still going to be asked to endure."

Peter Ashby's own intelligence, gathered through contacts he had carefully cultivated across nearly eighteen months of dangerous, patient work inside Kane's own orbit, confirmed the darker edges of Lydia's research with a specificity that left Daniel Brooks's council chamber unusually quiet the evening he delivered it. Alexander Cain, Peter reported, had begun in earnest what his own inner circle referred to only as "the integration" — a coordinated program, still in its early stages across most of the Council's ten administrative regions, to link every registered community's food distribution, medical resources, and communication access to a single unified credentialing system, administered from a rotating council of ten regional governors who answered, in every meaningful sense, to Cain alone.

"He is calling it economic recovery," Peter told the council. "He is calling it disaster relief coordination. He is calling it, in the version of the broadcast meant for communities still resisting full integration, nothing more than a practical convenience — a single card, a single number, that would let any registered citizen access food, medicine, fuel, and communication anywhere within the Council's

growing territory without the delays and shortages that still plague every unregistered community. I have seen the pilot version of the system myself, in the territory Kane now administers on Cain's behalf. I can tell you plainly that no one within a hundred miles of Iron Ridge buys so much as a loaf of bread anymore without it passing through that system first." He paused, choosing his next words with evident care. "I do not believe, having watched this system operate for the better part of a year, that its final form will remain merely a convenience for very much longer."

Rebecca, listening from the back of the council chamber, thought of Revelation, chapter thirteen, a passage her father had marked so heavily in his own study Bible that the page itself had begun to separate from its binding. *"And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name."* She said nothing aloud that evening, unwilling to speak a conclusion the council itself would need to reach in its own time and its own way. But she carried the weight of that verse home with her nonetheless, understanding, with a clarity that settled over her like the first cold air of the coming autumn, exactly how much closer the whole reorganizing world beyond Ashwood's borders had moved, in a single dangerous year, toward the exact system her father's own sermons had warned was still to come.

IV. What the Fall Harvest Taught

The second harvest of that second full year came in heavy through September, and Daniel Brooks, standing before the food council's gathered leadership to receive Curtis Boyd's final report, found himself struck by a realization that had been building in him, quietly, across the entire long, difficult season: that Ashwood, whatever trials still lay ahead of it, had become something considerably more permanent and more remarkable than the desperate, improvised survival project it had first been in the panicked weeks after the vanishing.

"We are not merely surviving anymore," he told the gathered council, and found, saying it aloud, that the words carried a weight he had not fully anticipated. "I think we have to be honest about that, and grateful for it, even knowing what's likely still ahead of us. We have built a functioning town — food, medicine, defense, faith, all of it working together in a way that eighteen months ago I would not have believed possible for any community our size to achieve without the kind of national infrastructure none of us have had access to since the very first week. Whatever Marcus Kane or Alexander Cain still intend for us, I do not believe either one of them is facing the frightened, improvising town they first tested at the Boyd farm two Augusts ago. I believe they are facing something considerably harder to break."

Jack Reynolds, standing near the back of the gathering, thought of Second Timothy, chapter four, a passage Walt Henderson had quoted to him more than once across two years of hard, patient friendship. *"I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith."* He did not believe, standing in that crowded fellowship hall with the whole weight of everything the town had survived settling over him, that Ashwood's course was anywhere close to finished. But he understood, for the first time with real, settled clarity, exactly what kind of fight this town had actually been fighting across two impossible years — not merely a fight for physical survival, though that fight had cost enough graves to fill an entire growing corner of the church cemetery, but a fight to remain, in the truest and

most costly sense, exactly who it had chosen to become in the earliest, most desperate days of the catastrophe.

Curtis Boyd himself, called forward by Daniel Brooks to give his own account of the harvest, spoke with the plain, unpolished honesty that had made him, almost without either man intending it, one of the food council's most trusted voices across two demanding years. "I buried my own father in the first winter," he told the gathered council, an admission Daniel had not previously heard him make in any public setting. "Man worked this same ground for forty years before me, and he didn't survive that first hard season to see what it could still produce once we learned how to manage it properly. I think about him every single planting season now. I think he'd be prouder of this harvest than any single crop he ever brought in himself, not because the yield is bigger — though it is — but because of everyone it's feeding beyond just our own family's table. He always used to quote me Galatians when I complained about a bad season. 'Let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.' I didn't understand that verse the way I understand it now. I understand it a great deal better with three seasons of exactly that kind of patient, faithful work behind me."

Mayor Brooks closed the harvest council that evening with a brief word of his own, standing before a room that had grown, across two years, from a handful of frightened department heads improvising a response to catastrophe into something closer to the full functioning government of a small, independent, faithful nation. "I did not run for mayor to lead a town through the end of the world," he told them, a rare flash of dry humor breaking through the evening's weightier reflections. "I ran because Harold Ferris talked me into it at a Rotary Club luncheon and I couldn't think of a polite way to say no. I have thought more than once, across these two impossible years, about how differently everything might have gone under different leadership, and I do not say that out of false modesty. I say it because I believe, as certainly as I believe anything, that whatever this town has become was never really my doing, or Jack's, or Sarah's, or any one of us individually. It was the doing of a whole town that chose, again and again, in a hundred small decisions no history book will ever fully capture, to keep faith with each other and with the God who never once stopped watching over us, even in our very worst hour."

V. The Gathering

Rebecca called the full Remnant together on the first Thursday of November, exactly as she had called them together every single Thursday for more than two years, but this particular gathering carried a weight that every long-standing member of the circle understood without needing to be told — an anniversary, of sorts, though none of them had ever formally marked the date before: the gathering fell, by Rebecca's own careful count, within days of the exact evening, more than two years earlier, when a Tuesday night Bible study in this very fellowship hall had been interrupted by the return of Jesus Christ Himself.

She had the room arranged, that particular Thursday, exactly as it had been arranged on the afternoon of the vanishing — folding chairs in the same loose semicircle her father had always favored, the same worn carpet beneath them, the same simple wooden cross at the front of the room that Caleb Whitfield had installed with his own hands decades earlier. Sophie Marsh's small shoes, which Denise Marsh had eventually, after much prayer, donated back to the church as a permanent memorial rather than keeping

them at her own bedside, sat in a small glass case near the entrance, a quiet, physical reminder of exactly what this room had witnessed on the single most consequential afternoon in human history.

"I want us to remember something together tonight," Rebecca told the gathered circle — grown now, in two remarkable years, from four grieving strangers around her father's kitchen table to a congregation that stretched across dozens of communities and touched, through Frank Pelletier's faithful broadcasts, thousands of lives none of them would ever personally meet. "This room is where it happened. Not somewhere else, not some distant place we only hear about — right here, in these very chairs, on an ordinary Tuesday evening that none of the people gathered for Bible study that night had any reason to believe would be their last on this earth. I think about that every single time we gather in this room, and I think it's important that we never once let ourselves grow so accustomed to everything we've built since then that we forget exactly what it cost, and exactly what it means, that this whole remarkable story began with an empty chair and a pair of glasses on the floor."

She turned to Matthew, chapter twenty-four, a passage she had saved deliberately for this particular anniversary. *"And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet... All these are the beginning of sorrows."* "I used to hear that phrase and think it sounded almost cruel," she said. "Beginning of sorrows. As though everything this town has already survived — the fire on the horizon, the hunger, County Road 17, every grave behind this building — was somehow only the opening chapter of something considerably larger and considerably harder still to come. I think I finally understand, two years into living inside that exact prophecy, that Jesus wasn't being cruel when He said it. He was being honest, the same honest way my father was always honest with this congregation, because He loved us too much to let us walk into what's still coming unprepared for exactly how hard it might still get."

VI. What Ethan Said

Ethan Walker rose that evening to speak, standing in the same fellowship hall where, more than two years earlier, he had first opened Emily's Bible with hands still shaking from a grief he had not yet learned how to properly carry.

"I keep thinking about something Emily used to say to me," he told the gathered circle, Emily's own worn Bible open in his hands. "She used to tell me that faith wasn't about knowing the whole story in advance. It was about trusting the Author enough to keep turning the page, even into chapters you couldn't see coming and might not have chosen for yourself if you'd been given the choice." He looked around the room, at faces marked now by two years of shared grief and shared hope in equal measure. "I didn't understand that at all, the morning I found her Bible open on our kitchen counter with her coffee gone cold beside it. I understand it considerably better now, two years and more graves than any of us should have had to dig later. I don't know what Alexander Cain's new world order still intends for this town, or for this whole broken country. I don't know how many more Thursdays we're going to gather in this exact room before whatever comes next finally arrives. I know I intend to keep turning the page, the way Emily always trusted the Author to write it — even the hardest chapters, even the ones I can't see coming yet."

Noah Simmons, twenty years old now and carrying himself with a settled maturity that still occasionally caught Rebecca by surprise, spoke after him, his voice steady in a way it had not been steady the first time he had haltingly prayed alone in his garage more than two years earlier. "I used to think being ready for whatever's coming meant not being afraid of it," he said. "I don't think that anymore. I think it means being afraid, honestly, the way all of us in this room are probably afraid tonight, and choosing to keep showing up anyway, the same way this whole town has kept showing up for two straight years, no matter how bad the fear ever got. I lost my whole family the same afternoon this room lost its Bible study. I have gained an entire town's worth of family since then, and I don't intend to let whatever's still coming take that from me without a fight — the same kind of fight Curtis Danvers gave on County Road 17, and Otis Vance gave without ever once picking up a weapon, and my own parents gave, quietly, faithfully, every single morning before I ever understood what they were actually teaching me."

Sarah Collins spoke last among the evening's testimonies, standing in the same fellowship hall where, more than two years earlier, she had first begun the long, difficult study of her father-in-law's sermon notes that eventually carried her from a settled, comfortable atheism into a faith she now could not imagine having lived without. "I want to tell you about the hardest patient I ever treated," she said, and the room quieted further, sensing the particular weight in her voice. "Not medically hardest. Spiritually hardest. It was myself, in the first weeks after the vanishing, refusing for days to even open Josephine Antonelli's Bible because I was certain that doing so would mean admitting my entire professional life had been built on a foundation I'd never bothered to examine. I have thought about that stubbornness more than once across these two years, every time I've sat with a grieving family and watched them wrestle with the exact same fear I once carried myself. I want to tell every person in this room who is still wrestling with that fear tonight: the examination is worth it. I promise you, from the other side of it, the examination is always worth it." She held up Marcus Chen's small worn Testament, the one that had sat on her nightstand for two years now. "First Peter, chapter one: 'Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations.' We are still in the season. I don't know how much longer it lasts. I know the rejoicing on the other side of it is real, because I have already tasted enough of it these two years to trust the rest of the promise completely."

VII. What Rebecca Read Last

Rebecca closed the gathering that night with her father's letter — the same letter she had discovered in the lockbox in his church office more than two years earlier, read now, for the first time, aloud to the full assembled Remnant rather than kept as her own private, guarded treasure.

She read it slowly, her voice steady despite the tears that had never once, across two years of countless readings in private, stopped coming when she reached certain lines. *"I do not know what the world looks like as you read this,"* her father's words said, carrying across a room that had grown, in two remarkable years, into something he could never have fully imagined when he wrote them. *"I suspect, given everything I understand from Scripture about what follows this event, that it is a far darker and far harder world than the one I am writing to you from tonight. I am sorry that I cannot be there to walk through it with you. But I want you to know something else, something I believe with everything in*

me: God has not abandoned you simply because I am gone. My voice was only ever an echo of His. Now that the echo has fallen silent, I pray you will finally hear the original."

"I have spent two years learning exactly how true that was," Rebecca told the gathered circle, closing the letter gently. "My father's voice led me to faith, and it has led hundreds of you, and thousands more beyond these walls that I will probably never meet this side of eternity. But it was never the destination. It was only ever the echo, pointing toward the original voice underneath it — the same voice that spoke this whole universe into being, the same voice that will one day, Scripture promises us, finally silence every false peace and every counterfeit government this broken world has ever built for itself." She opened her father's Bible one final time that evening, to Revelation, chapter twenty-one, a passage she had saved for exactly this moment. *"And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away... And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."*

"I don't know how many more chapters this town has to walk through before that promise is finally, fully kept," she said. "I believe, honestly, that the hardest chapters may still be ahead of us — that whatever Alexander Cain is still building, whatever Marcus Kane still intends, whatever this whole broken world is still going to demand of everyone gathered in this room, the worst of it has not yet arrived. But I believe, with everything my father ever taught me and everything two years of watching God carry this town through catastrophe after catastrophe has taught me since, that the ending is already written, and already won, however many hard chapters still stand between us and finally reaching it."

VIII. The First Snow

The first snow of that third winter fell on a quiet Tuesday evening in late November, settling soft and silent over a town that bore, in every visible and invisible way, the full accumulated weight of everything it had survived since an ordinary Tuesday afternoon two and a half years earlier had ended the only world its residents had ever known.

Daniel Brooks watched it fall from the steps of the town hall, standing beneath the old Civil War cannon in the same spot where he had first addressed a shocked, grieving crowd on the worst night of his life, and found himself, watching the snow settle over rooftops and watchtowers and the small, steadily growing cemetery behind Ashwood Community Baptist Church, thinking not of everything the town had lost, though the losses remained as real and as costly as they had ever been, but of everything it had somehow, impossibly, managed to build in spite of them. He thought of Harold Ferris, gone now more than a year, who had talked him into this office at a Rotary luncheon that felt, from this distance, like it belonged to an entirely different lifetime. He thought of every name behind the church that this office had asked him to help bury, and of every name still walking the streets of this town tonight, warm and fed and armed and watchful, because of decisions this office had been forced to make in rooms considerably less comfortable than this one. He did not know, watching the snow fall over a town he had never once expected or wanted to lead through the end of the world, whether history

would remember his own small part in Ashwood's survival at all. He found, standing there in the cold, that he had stopped needing it to.

Jack Reynolds walked the perimeter one final time before full dark, checking each watchtower's readiness with the same careful discipline he had brought to the task for more than two years now, and found the same settled, prayerful peace waiting for him at each post that he had once believed, in his hardest years overseas, he would never fully find again in this life.

Sarah Collins finished her evening rounds at a hospital that had, across two impossible years, become something closer to a genuine medical center than the desperate, rationed facility it had been in the earliest catastrophic weeks, and walked home through the falling snow thinking of Josephine Antonelli's calm, unhurried certainty, of Marcus Chen's small worn Testament still sitting on her own nightstand, of every hard, holy lesson two years of impossible grief had taught her about a God she had once been entirely certain did not exist.

And Rebecca Whitfield stood once more at her father's memorial stone in the gathering dark, snow settling gently across the small marker and the growing rows of graves surrounding it, her father's Bible held against her chest the same careful way she had carried it every single day since the night she first discovered it open on the floor of a vinyl chair in a hospital room that no longer existed in any recognizable form.

She thought of Romans, chapter eight, a passage she had read to more grieving families than she could properly count across two remarkable, costly years. *"For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."* She thought, too, of Philippians, chapter one, a verse her father had underlined so many times in his own study Bible that the ink had begun to bleed faintly through the thin page beneath it: *"Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ."* Her father had begun a good work in this town, in this fellowship hall, in her own once-broken faith, on an ordinary Tuesday evening that had ended his earthly ministry and, in the same impossible instant, begun a considerably larger one he would never see completed this side of eternity. She did not know, standing there in the quiet, falling snow, exactly what the coming months and years still held for Ashwood, Ohio — whether Marcus Kane's uneasy silence would finally break into open war, whether Alexander Cain's growing regional authority would find some new and more total way to demand the town's submission, whether the darker chapters her father's own careful theology had always warned were still coming might finally, fully arrive at Ashwood's own doorstep in ways no watchtower or food council or faithful congregation could fully prepare for.

She knew only what she had learned, across two impossible years of grief and discovery in equal measure: that the God who had carried this small, stubborn Ohio town through fire and hunger and betrayal and loss had not once, in all that time, failed to meet them exactly where they stood — and that whatever winter, literal or otherwise, still lay ahead of them, she intended to face it the same way this entire remarkable town had learned to face everything else since the world first ended on an ordinary Tuesday afternoon: together, faithfully, and without ever once surrendering the hope that had carried them this far.

The snow kept falling, soft and silent, over a changed America that bore almost no resemblance to the nation it had been before the vanishing — over watchtowers standing guard against threats gathering in every direction, over a hospital counting its hard-won supplies with careful, disciplined gratitude, over a church whose broadcast now reached further into the wounded darkness with every passing month, and over a small, growing cemetery where the names of the faithful departed stood as the truest testimony yet to everything this town had already paid, and everything it remained willing to pay still, for the sake of the faith that had carried it, against every reasonable expectation, this far into the story.

Far beyond Ashwood's own quiet, snow-covered borders, in capitals and command centers scattered across a reorganizing world, Alexander Cain continued building the foundation of an authority that would, in the difficult years still to come, demand considerably more from the world than food distribution and restored infrastructure — a demand that Rebecca Whitfield, and Jack Reynolds, and Sarah Collins, and every faithful member of Ashwood's small, remarkable Remnant, would find themselves called to resist with a cost considerably higher than anything the town had yet been asked to pay.

But that story, and the trials it would bring, belonged to another season, another year, another chapter not yet written.

For tonight, the snow fell gently over Ashwood, Ohio, and the town slept, watchful and faithful, beneath it — survivors of the vanishing, survivors of the fire, survivors of hunger and grief and betrayal and war, waiting, together, for whatever the next season of an impossible, unfinished story would finally bring.

END OF BOOK ONE

ASHES OF AMERICA — BOOK ONE AFTER THE VANISHING by Dr. Paul Crawford

EPILOGUE

The Breaking Begins

"For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places." — Matthew 24:7 (KJV)

"And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns." — Revelation 13:1 (KJV)

I. Another Day

Ashwood, Ohio did not stop needing to survive simply because a single hard winter had passed into a wary, watchful spring, and Daniel Brooks understood, standing at his office window on a cold February morning less than three months after the first snow of the town's third winter had settled over Rebecca

Whitfield's father's grave, that survival itself had become, for this small stubborn town, something closer to a permanent condition than a temporary crisis to be endured and then set aside.

The ration lines still formed every morning outside what had once been Ferris Hardware, shorter now than they had been in the desperate first year but no less essential to the daily rhythm of a town that had learned, at considerable cost, never again to take a single day's food supply for granted. The watchtowers still stood their rotations, day and night, exactly as they had stood them for going on three years, Jack Reynolds's disciplined training program having produced, by that third spring, a defense force considerably larger and considerably better trained than the improvised volunteer patrols that had first organized themselves in the chaotic weeks after the vanishing. Sarah Collins's hospital still treated its steady stream of injuries and illnesses with supplies that never quite stretched as far as she needed them to, and Rebecca Whitfield's Thursday gatherings still filled the fellowship hall to its now-familiar capacity, Frank Pelletier's broadcast still carrying her father's recorded voice, and increasingly her own, to communities scattered across a landscape that grew, with every passing month, more dangerous rather than less.

"I used to think there would be a day when this stopped being an emergency," Daniel told Jack, the two men reviewing the morning's security reports together in the mayor's cramped office, "and started being simply how we lived. I don't think that day is coming, Jack. I think this is how we live now. I think the sooner all of us stop waiting for it to end and start building for a life that includes this kind of vigilance permanently, the better prepared we'll be for whatever's still ahead."

Jack did not disagree. He had stopped, somewhere across the last three years, expecting any single victory to be final. Every battle won — the eastern watchtower retaken, County Road 17 held, Marcus Kane's spring assault survived at terrible cost — had bought Ashwood time rather than safety, and he had learned, the hard way, exactly how much difference there was between the two.

He thought, walking the perimeter later that same cold February morning, of First Peter, chapter five, a passage Walt Henderson had taught him to lean on in the earliest, hardest months of organizing the town's defense. *"Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour."* He had once believed that verse described a single, identifiable enemy — Kane, or whatever raiding band happened to be threatening the town in a given season. He understood now, three years deep into a war that kept changing shape without ever fully ending, that the verse described something considerably larger and more patient than any single adversary: a vigilance that could never be permitted to lapse, not for a season, not for a single quiet winter, no matter how settled the peace might come to feel.

The training yard behind the old high school, converted in the second year into Ashwood's primary drilling ground, stayed busy through that whole cold spring with a rotation of recruits considerably younger than the volunteers who had first answered Jack's call in the panicked weeks after the vanishing — boys and girls who had been children when the world ended, growing now into a generation that had never known any other way of living, and who trained with a seriousness that both heartened and quietly grieved him. He remembered, watching a sixteen-year-old named Cody Marsh — Denise Marsh's nephew, orphaned in the second winter when his own parents' farm fell to a raiding party Jack's own patrol had arrived at eleven minutes too late to save — drill through the same

defensive maneuvers Jack had once taught grown men twice his age, that this was not the childhood any of them would have chosen for the town's next generation. It was, nonetheless, the childhood this broken world had left them, and Jack had come to believe that his own responsibility was not to mourn that fact indefinitely but to make certain every young person who inherited it inherited also the skill, and the faith, to survive it.

II. What Kane Built Instead

Marcus Kane did not attempt a second direct assault on Ashwood in the months following his costly withdrawal that first May. He did not need to. Peter Ashby's continuing intelligence, gathered at real and mounting personal risk across nearly two years of dangerous work inside the edges of Kane's own territory, painted a picture, delivered to Ashwood's council in a series of increasingly troubling reports, of a man who had learned a harder, more patient lesson from his failure at Ashwood's gates than any of them had initially hoped he would learn.

Kane turned instead, across that third year, toward the smaller, less defended communities scattered throughout the counties surrounding his own base at Iron Ridge — towns with names Ashwood's residents had once known only as places passed through on the way to somewhere else, towns without a Jack Reynolds to organize their defense or a Rebecca Whitfield to steady their faith, towns that fell, one after another, into Kane's expanding sphere of control with a speed that left even Peter Ashby's careful reporting struggling to keep pace.

"He has stopped trying to break Ashwood by force," Peter told the council that March, his voice carrying the particular weariness of a man who had spent too many months watching a slow catastrophe unfold from close enough to touch it. "He is building a kingdom around us instead. Millbrook fell in October. Casswell Junction in December. He controls, by my best count, close to a dozen townships now, stretching from Iron Ridge nearly to the Pennsylvania line, and he administers every one of them through the exact same arrangement he first offered Ashwood itself — submit to his authority, surrender your independent defense, and receive in exchange the food, fuel, and security his growing network can provide considerably more reliably than any of these smaller towns could manage alone."

Daniel Brooks listened to Peter's account with the particular stillness he had learned, across three years of difficult leadership, to bring to news that demanded careful thought rather than immediate reaction. "How long," he asked, "before Kane's expanding network reaches communities close enough to threaten our own supply lines directly? Danforth, or the farms along the western county line?" Peter's answer carried no comfort. "Casswell Junction sits less than thirty miles from Danforth's own border, Mr. Mayor. At the pace he's moving, I would not be surprised to see Kane's authority reach Danforth's own doorstep within the year, whatever mutual defense compact stands between us." Sylvia Marchetti, present for the report at Daniel's own invitation, nodded grimly at the assessment. "We've already doubled our own patrols along that western line," she said. "I don't intend to let Danforth become the next Casswell Junction without a considerably harder fight than Kane's found from any of the smaller towns he's absorbed so far."

Lydia Hayes, cross-referencing Peter's reports against her own growing archive of the region's transformation, found the pattern troubling in ways that extended well beyond the immediate military calculus. "He isn't simply conquering territory," she told the council, spreading a hand-drawn map across the table that showed, in stark, unavoidable visual terms, exactly how much of the surrounding region had fallen under Kane's expanding authority in less than a year. "He's building the exact administrative structure Alexander Cain's own Global Recovery Council has been building at a national and international level — registration, resource control, a single point of authority that every community within his reach now depends on for its own survival. I don't believe that resemblance is accidental. I believe Marcus Kane has found, in Cain's broader model, a considerably more effective template than the naked violence he originally tried against us."

Marcus Kane himself, in the fortified compound he had built from the bones of Iron Ridge's old grain elevator, understood the arrangement in considerably plainer terms than either Lydia's careful documentation or Rebecca's theological reading of it. He had received, that same February, his own summons from Alexander Cain's regional office — not an invitation, as Ashwood had received, but a directive, delivered by a courier whose quiet, unhurried confidence had unsettled Kane in a way few things had unsettled him across three years of building his own considerable power by force. The directive was simple enough on its face: Kane's territory would be formally absorbed into the Global Recovery Council's administrative structure, his own authority preserved and even expanded as the Council's appointed regional enforcer, in exchange for bringing every community still resisting integration — Ashwood chief among them — fully under Council control within the coming year.

Kane had built his own small kingdom on the conviction that strength alone determined who survived this broken world and who did not, a philosophy that had cost him, at Ashwood's gates that first May, more men than he had ever previously lost in a single engagement. He recognized, reading Cain's directive by lamplight in his own fortified office, that he was being offered something he had not expected to find this deep into the collapse: a considerably larger throne than the one he had carved out for himself, purchased at the cost of his own independence. He signed the directive within the week. Whatever reservations he carried about surrendering his own authority to a power even he did not fully understand, they did not outweigh, in the end, his hunger for the far greater dominion Cain's expanding system now offered him in exchange.

Rebecca thought of Daniel, chapter seven, reading it again that same evening in the quiet of her father's old study. *"And the fourth beast shall be the fourth kingdom upon earth, which shall be diverse from all kingdoms, and shall devour the whole earth, and shall tread it down, and break it in pieces."* Kane's growing dominion was small, she understood, set against the scale of what Cain himself was building across an entire wounded world — but it was, in its own contained way, the same pattern in miniature: force giving way to control, control dressed as provision, provision demanded in exchange for submission. She did not believe, closing her father's Bible that night, that the two men's ambitions would remain separate for very much longer.

Sylvia Marchetti brought a firsthand account of Kane's expanding administration to Ashwood's council two weeks later, having personally interviewed a small group of refugees who had fled Casswell Junction rather than accept the terms Kane's representatives had offered their town. "They were given three days to decide," Sylvia told the gathered council, her own weathered face carrying the particular

grief of a woman who had spent three years absorbing exactly this kind of story. "Submit to Kane's registration, surrender any independent weapons beyond what his own appointed local militia retained, and receive guaranteed food and fuel allocation from his supply network. Or refuse, and lose access to the trade routes his forces now controlled through the whole surrounding region — routes that, three years into this collapse, most small farming communities depend on for the goods they can no longer produce entirely on their own." She gestured toward the small group of exhausted, hollow-eyed families Ashwood's own hospital had spent the past week treating for exposure and malnutrition. "These twenty-three people chose to walk rather than register. I do not know how many others in that same town chose differently, out of desperation I cannot entirely blame them for feeling."

Daniel Brooks authorized emergency shelter and rationing for the Casswell Junction refugees that same evening, understanding, as Ashwood's population swelled once more with families who had lost everything rather than surrender their independence, exactly what the arrangement cost the town's own already-stretched resources — and exactly why, watching Sylvia's report land across the council chamber, he had no intention of ever reconsidering that cost. "We fed the first refugees who came to us three years ago because it was the right thing to do," he told the council that night, "and we very nearly broke ourselves doing it before we learned how to do it sustainably. I don't regret a single ounce of grain we gave away in that first terrible winter, and I don't intend to turn away a single family who chooses faith and freedom over Kane's registration now, whatever it costs us to keep that promise."

III. The Voice That Kept Rising

Alexander Cain addressed the surviving world again that spring, his broadcast carried, by Frank Pelletier's careful monitoring, across every frequency his equipment could still reach — a speech considerably more expansive than any he had delivered since his first appearance nearly two years earlier, marking, though few of his listeners fully understood it in the moment, a deliberate escalation in both the scope of his ambition and the confidence with which he now pursued it.

"Two years ago, this world lay in ruins," Cain's voice told a global audience that had grown, across two years of careful cultivation, to trust him with a devotion that startled even Lydia Hayes's careful documentation of it. "Nations that once stood as rivals had been reduced, in a single terrible night, to smoking craters and desperate, starving populations with no government capable of feeding them, no infrastructure capable of sheltering them, no leadership capable of restoring even the most basic order to a world that had lost everything it once relied upon. I made you a promise on that first broadcast, a promise many of you had every reason to doubt. I promised recovery. I promised order. I promised that from these ashes, something better than what was lost might yet be built." He paused, and Frank Pelletier, monitoring the broadcast from his own equipment shed, felt a chill he could not entirely attribute to the cold spring evening. "Today, I tell you that promise has been kept, and I tell you that the work is not finished. The ten regions of our Global Recovery Council now coordinate the resources of a healing world more effectively than any single nation ever coordinated its own before the vanishing. Hunger recedes where our authority extends. Violence recedes where our authority extends. The chaos that nearly consumed what remained of human civilization recedes, region by region, township by township, wherever this Council's authority is fully and finally established."

Lydia listened to the broadcast three times over, transcribing it word for word into her growing archive, and found herself troubled most by the final promise Cain extended before the broadcast's close. "In the coming months," his voice told the listening world, "we will complete the integration of our universal credentialing system across every region under this Council's authority — a single, simple identification granting every registered citizen full access to food, medicine, fuel, and communication, anywhere within our growing network, without delay, without shortage, without the fear that has haunted every family on this earth since the night the cities burned. I understand that some communities have hesitated to complete their registration. I understand their caution; these have been hard years, and trust is not easily rebuilt. I tell those communities plainly: the door remains open. But I tell them also that the world beyond that door grows harder, colder, and more dangerous with every season that independence is chosen over integration. I would rather welcome you than lose you to that hardening world. The choice, as it has always been, remains entirely your own."

"He makes it sound so reasonable," Sarah Collins said quietly, when Frank played the recording for the assembled council two days later. "That's what frightens me most about it. Every single word of that broadcast sounds like exactly the kind of leadership a broken world actually needs. If I hadn't spent three years watching what his 'integration' actually costs the communities that accept it, I think I might believe him myself."

Rebecca turned, without needing to search for it, to Second Thessalonians, chapter two, a passage her father had marked so thoroughly in his own study Bible that its pages had begun to soften from decades of returning to it. *"Whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved."* "That's exactly the danger, Sarah," she said. "It isn't supposed to sound unreasonable. My father used to say the most dangerous lies are never the obvious ones. They're the ones dressed carefully enough in genuine kindness that good, frightened people find them impossible to refuse."

Grant Sowell, listening from his usual seat near the council table — a place he had earned, across three years, through a steadiness and sound judgment few in Ashwood would have predicted from the man who once ran the county's pawn shop — raised a question that had clearly been troubling him since Frank's recording ended. "What happens to a town three or four years into Cain's system, once the registration is complete and the dependence is total? I ran a business built on leverage for fifteen years before I ever set foot in a church. I know exactly what it looks like when someone builds a system where the other party has no real alternative left. The terms only ever get worse from there. Never better."

Lydia Hayes answered him with the same careful, documented precision she brought to every difficult question the council raised. "I don't have direct evidence yet of what Cain's system demands once the initial integration is complete," she admitted. "The system is still too young, even in its earliest-adopting regions, for that pattern to have fully revealed itself. But Peter's reports from inside Kane's own territory, which operates on a smaller and cruder version of the same model, suggest exactly the trajectory Grant describes. The demands begin modest. They do not stay modest. Every single account I have gathered describes communities that believed, in their first year of submission, that they had made a reasonable and necessary trade — and who found, by their second or third year, that the trade

had quietly become considerably less reasonable than it first appeared, with no meaningful way left to renegotiate its terms."

IV. What the Frightened World Chose

Across the reorganizing landscape of what had once been the United States, and across a wounded world extending far beyond it, Alexander Cain's promise found an audience desperate enough, after nearly three years of hunger and violence and grief, to receive it as something very near to salvation.

Peter Ashby's intelligence, expanding now well beyond his original focus on Kane's own territory, brought the council reports from further afield across that spring — accounts, filtered through Frank Pelletier's careful network of trusted radio contacts, of entire regions beyond Ohio's own borders that had accepted Cain's integrated system wholesale, exchanging whatever independence had survived the collapse for the promised security of his growing network. Detroit's remaining population, scattered and desperate after the city's own partial destruction, had registered nearly in full within a matter of months. Much of what remained of the industrial Midwest had followed. Even communities that Lydia's earlier research had documented as fiercely resistant to any outside authority had begun, one by one, to accept registration as the cost of surviving winters that grew, each year, measurably harder than the one before.

"I don't believe most of these people are choosing evil," Rebecca told the gathered Remnant one Thursday evening that spring, addressing a question Grant Sowell had raised about how to understand the growing wave of communities accepting Cain's authority. "I believe most of them are exhausted, and frightened, and desperate for someone, anyone, to promise them the nightmare might finally be ending. I understand that desperation better than I would like to. I have felt it myself, more than once, across these three years." She opened her father's Bible to Matthew, chapter twenty-four, a passage that had become, across the ministry's whole difficult history, something close to its defining text. *"For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect."* "My father used to say that the great deception Scripture warns us about was never going to look like obvious evil. It was going to look like exactly what a broken, frightened world was most desperately praying for. I believe that's precisely what we're watching happen now, region by region, all around us. I don't say that to condemn the people making that choice. I say it because I believe we are called to see it clearly, and to choose, ourselves, a different foundation to stand on — whatever it costs us to keep standing on it."

Ethan Walker, listening from his usual seat near the back of the fellowship hall, thought of Joshua, chapter twenty-four, the passage Pastor Whitfield had preached so often in his final years that half the congregation could recite it from memory before he finished reading it aloud. *"Choose you this day whom ye will serve... but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."* He had made that choice himself, brokenly and imperfectly, in the terrible weeks after Emily's disappearance, and he understood, sitting in that crowded room three years later, that the choice was not one a person made only once. It was one the whole world, it seemed, was now being asked to make again and again, region by region, broadcast by broadcast, as Alexander Cain's patient, reasonable voice continued extending its reach across every corner of a frightened, exhausted earth still reeling from everything it had already lost.

Noah Simmons raised his hand that evening, a habit he had carried since his very first hesitant appearance at the Remnant's gatherings two years earlier, and asked the question that had clearly been sitting with him since Rebecca first began speaking. "How do we tell people who haven't registered yet — people we still know, people some of us grew up with in towns that have already fallen under Kane's control or Cain's — how do we tell them the truth without sounding like we think we're better than them for refusing it? Because I don't think we are. I think most of us in this room would probably have registered too, if we'd faced that choice before we ever found this church."

Rebecca considered the question with the same care she brought to every difficult thing Noah asked her, understanding that the young man who had once haltingly prayed alone in his garage had grown, across two remarkable years, into one of the Remnant's most thoughtful and most trusted voices. "You're right that none of us gets to feel superior about it," she told him. "I've told this congregation before that I don't believe most of the people accepting Cain's system are choosing evil. I believe they're exhausted and frightened, and I believe grace, not judgment, is what Scripture calls us to extend to them. But I also believe love means telling people the truth, even when the truth is hard to hear, and even when we can't promise them that refusing will be easy. First John, chapter four: 'Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God.' We tell them what we've seen. We tell them what Scripture warns. We tell them the door of this church, and this town, remains open to anyone who wants to walk through it, whatever they've already accepted elsewhere. And then we trust the Holy Spirit to do the work in their hearts that none of us can do for them ourselves."

V. The Line That Remained

Daniel Brooks called an emergency session of the full town council in the final week of that March, prompted by a formal communication Frank Pelletier's equipment had intercepted three days earlier — a direct message, addressed specifically to Ashwood by name, inviting the town's leadership to a regional summit where representatives of Alexander Cain's Global Recovery Council would present, in person, the full terms of integration to any community still weighing the decision.

"They know who we are," Daniel told the assembled council, setting the intercepted message on the table before them. "They know we've refused Kane. They know we've refused every prior overture from Cain's own broadcasts. This isn't a general invitation. This is addressed to Ashwood specifically, which tells me they consider us significant enough, three years into this, to warrant a direct approach rather than simply waiting for us to fall in line with the rest of the region."

The debate that followed carried a weight Daniel had rarely felt in three years of difficult council sessions. Harold Ferris, cautious as always, argued for at least sending a delegation to hear the full terms before rejecting them outright — "we owe it to this town to know exactly what we're refusing, not simply what we assume we're refusing." Curtis Boyd, thinking of a harvest that grew harder to sustain with every passing season, admitted the promised resources were tempting in ways he was not entirely comfortable voicing aloud. But it was Jack Reynolds, standing at the room's edge with the particular stillness Daniel had learned, across three years, to recognize as his most considered and most serious mode, who finally spoke the words that settled the room.

"I've watched what Kane's version of this arrangement costs the towns that accept it," Jack said. "I've watched Peter Ashby risk his own life to bring us the truth of it. Every community that surrenders its independent defense to someone else's authority survives, for a while, considerably more comfortably than we do. And every single one of them, without exception, eventually discovers that the authority they surrendered to intends considerably more from them than food distribution and border security. I don't believe Alexander Cain's version of that same arrangement will prove any different, whatever comfortable language he wraps it in. I believe, if anything, it will prove considerably more total, because his ambition reaches considerably further than Marcus Kane's ever will."

Rebecca spoke last, her father's letter — the one she had read aloud to the full Remnant at the fellowship hall gathering the previous autumn — carried with her into the council chamber though she did not need to open it again to remember its closing words. "Revelation, chapter thirteen," she told the gathered council, "describes a system where no one may buy or sell without submitting to a single mark of authority. I do not know, with certainty, whether what Alexander Cain is building is that exact system, or merely its forerunner. I know that every single feature of his growing network — the credentialing, the total dependence, the reasonable, patient voice promising security in exchange for submission — matches what Scripture warned us to watch for with a precision I find impossible to dismiss as coincidence. I believe this council already knows, in its own heart, exactly what answer it intends to give this invitation. I believe the only real question is whether we have the courage to give that answer honestly, understanding fully what it may still cost us to keep giving it."

The council's vote, when Daniel finally called it, was unanimous. Ashwood would not send a delegation. Ashwood would not integrate. Ashwood would continue, as it had continued for three impossible years, to stand on its own — watchful, faithful, and increasingly alone in a world that seemed, with every passing season, to be choosing a different and considerably easier path.

Daniel drafted the town's formal reply that same night, choosing his words with the same careful deliberation he had brought to every difficult communication of his three years in office, understanding that whatever he wrote would likely be read by considerably more powerful eyes than any single letter he had ever composed before the collapse. "Ashwood, Ohio thanks the Global Recovery Council for its invitation," the reply read, "and respectfully declines to send a delegation to the proposed summit. This town has survived nearly three years since the vanishing through the faith, labor, and mutual sacrifice of its own residents, in partnership with neighboring communities who share our commitment to independent self-governance. We do not doubt the Council's stated intention to provide relief to a suffering world, and we do not condemn any community that chooses to accept its terms. We simply ask that our own choice to decline be received with the same respect we extend to theirs." He read the letter aloud to Rebecca before sending it, and found himself grateful, not for the first time in three difficult years, for the quiet certainty in her face when she told him it was exactly right.

VI. The Breaking

Frank Pelletier picked up the final transmission of that difficult week almost by accident, a fragment of encrypted military communication his equipment had never been sophisticated enough to fully decode, caught in the narrow window between two of Cain's own scheduled broadcasts. What he could decipher

of it — enough for Peter Ashby to confirm, through his own separate channels three days later, that the fragment was genuine — described troop movements considerably larger than anything Marcus Kane's own forces could field alone, moving in coordinated patterns across three separate regions of what had once been the American Midwest, under an authority the fragment identified only by a designation none of Ashwood's council had previously encountered: the Global Recovery Council's newly formed Regional Compliance Directorate.

"I don't believe this is Kane acting alone anymore," Peter told the council, delivering the confirmation in person rather than trusting it to radio. "I believe Alexander Cain has begun extending direct military authority into regions that have resisted integration, using local warlords like Kane as the visible face of an enforcement structure that answers, ultimately, to Cain's own Council. I do not have full details of what this Directorate intends, or when its authority will reach as far as our own borders. I know enough to tell you plainly that the patient, voluntary phase of Cain's expansion appears to be drawing to its close, and that whatever comes next is unlikely to remain merely an invitation for very much longer."

Rebecca received the news standing in the same fellowship hall where, three years earlier almost to the week, her father's Bible study had been interrupted by the return of Jesus Christ Himself — and found herself thinking, with a clarity that felt less like fear than like the settling of a long-expected certainty, of Matthew twenty-four once more, a chapter that had become, across three impossible years, something closer to a roadmap than a warning. *"All these are the beginning of sorrows."* She had read that verse to the gathered Remnant only months earlier, at the close of Book One's long, hard first chapter of the Tribulation's opening. She understood now, hearing Peter's report, exactly how much truth had been packed into that single phrase — that everything Ashwood had survived across three years of fire and hunger and betrayal and loss had been, in the truest and most sobering sense, only the beginning.

Daniel Brooks closed that final council session of the week with a quiet more solemn than any he had led before. "Whatever this Directorate intends," he told the gathered leadership, "I believe we have to prepare for the possibility that Ashwood's long season of relative peace, however uneasy it has always been, is coming to an end. Jack, I want every watchtower at full readiness within the week. Sarah, I want your medical supplies inventoried and secured. Rebecca —" he paused, and something in his weathered face softened despite the gravity of the moment. "I want your people praying like they've never prayed before. I believe we are going to need it."

Jack Reynolds left that session and walked directly to the training yard, finding Cody Marsh and the rest of the youngest recruits still drilling in the last gray light of the evening, and stood watching them for a long moment before calling them together. "I'm not going to pretend I know exactly what's coming," he told them, sixteen young faces turned up toward him with the particular mixture of fear and trust he had come to recognize in every recruit he had ever trained. "I've told you before that this town has survived things I never expected it to survive, and I believe it will survive whatever's coming next too, if we do our part honestly and trust God with the rest. I want you to go home tonight and tell your families that watch rotations are changing starting tomorrow. I want you to get what sleep you can. And I want you to remember, whatever happens in the weeks ahead, that you are not fighting alone, and you have never once been fighting alone, not for a single day since this whole town first learned what it meant to stand together." He thought, dismissing them into the gathering dark, of

Deuteronomy chapter thirty-one, a verse Walt Henderson had spoken over him more than once across three hard years. *"Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them: for the LORD thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee."*

Sarah Collins spent that same night inventorying every bandage, every bottle of antibiotics, every unit of the small blood supply her hospital had painstakingly built across three years, working past midnight with two of her most trusted junior physicians until the count was complete and triple-checked. She thought, closing the final ledger, of the trembling, uncertain woman who had first opened Josephine Antonelli's Bible three years earlier, entirely uncertain whether she believed a single word written in it, and found herself grateful, in the quiet exhaustion of that long night, for exactly how far that uncertain woman had traveled since.

Outside the town hall, the last of that hard third winter's snow was finally beginning to melt from Ashwood's quiet streets, running in thin, cold rivulets toward a spring the town had once hoped, however cautiously, might finally bring something closer to lasting peace. It would not. Far beyond Ashwood's watchful borders, in command centers and capitals scattered across a reorganizing world, Alexander Cain's patient consolidation was drawing, region by region, toward the harder, more total phase Rebecca's own study of Scripture had always warned was still to come — a breaking that would test everything this small, faithful town had built across three impossible years, and that would demand, in the difficult chapters still ahead, a cost considerably higher than anything Ashwood had yet been asked to pay.

Rebecca stood once more at her father's grave that same evening, the last of the winter snow melting in slow rivulets around the small stone marker, and read aloud, to no one but herself and the God she had come to trust with everything she had left, the final verses of Habakkuk's own difficult prophecy — words her father had preached more than once in his final years, and which she had leaned on more heavily across the last three years than any other single passage of Scripture. *"Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places."* She did not know what the coming Directorate's arrival would cost this town that had already paid so much. She knew, closing her father's Bible against the cold spring evening, exactly where her own feet intended to keep walking, whatever high and difficult places that walk still led her through.

The Vanishing had ended one world. The ashes of that world had, against every reasonable expectation, allowed a stubborn, faithful town to build something worth defending in its place. But the breaking of the fragile peace that had allowed that building to happen was, as the last snow melted from Ashwood's streets and the Regional Compliance Directorate's coordinated movements gathered pace beyond its borders, only just beginning.

END OF BOOK ONE

The story continues in Ashes of America, Book Two.

Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

Thank you for taking the journey through the pages of **Ashes of America: After the Vanishing**.

Whether you finished this novel in a single weekend or read it one chapter at a time, I am grateful that you chose to spend your time with the people of Ashwood, Ohio. My hope is that their story has entertained you, challenged you, and perhaps even caused you to think more deeply about eternity.

While this novel is a work of fiction, the questions it raises are very real.

What if everything changed in a single moment?

What if the ordinary routines of life were suddenly interrupted forever?

What if the Bible's warnings about the future are true?

For centuries, Christians have looked forward to the return of Jesus Christ. The promise of His coming has inspired hope, encouraged perseverance, and reminded believers that this world is not our final home. Throughout the New Testament we are repeatedly called to live with expectancy, faithfully serving the Lord while looking for "that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13).

The events portrayed in this novel represent one fictional interpretation of how life might unfold following the Rapture of the Church. They are not intended to predict the future in every detail or to identify specific nations, leaders, or timelines. Rather, they are meant to encourage readers to consider the certainty of Christ's return and the urgency of being prepared to meet Him.

One of the reasons I chose to tell this story through the eyes of a small town is because I believe the greatest stories are often found in ordinary places.

Ashwood could be any town in America.

It could be the town where you grew up.

It could be the place where your family worships, where your children attend school, where neighbors gather for Friday night football games, and where everyone knows one another by name.

When extraordinary events collide with ordinary lives, we discover what people truly believe.

Some characters in this story found hope.

Others found courage.

Some discovered faith for the very first time.

Others refused to believe, even when the evidence stood before them.

Those same choices confront every generation.

As you closed this first book, you undoubtedly realized that the story is only beginning. The people of Ashwood have survived the initial chaos of the Rapture and the destruction that followed, but even

greater challenges lie ahead. Their faith will be tested. Their courage will be refined. Their commitment to Jesus Christ will cost them more than they ever imagined.

I invite you to continue the journey in **Book Two, *The Breaking of America***, where neighboring communities descend into open conflict, the foundations of a new world system begin to emerge, and the people of Ashwood discover that surviving is not enough—they must also decide whom they will serve.

Most importantly, I want to leave you with this thought.

No one knows the day or the hour of Christ's return. The purpose of biblical prophecy is not to satisfy our curiosity but to strengthen our faith, encourage holy living, and remind us that God is sovereign over history. The greatest preparation for the future is not storing supplies or predicting tomorrow's headlines—it is knowing Jesus Christ today.

If you have never trusted Him as your Savior, I encourage you to open the Scriptures and discover the hope that only He can give. God's invitation remains open:

> "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."
> —Romans 10:13

Thank you again for reading **Ashes of America: After the Vanishing**.

May God bless you, strengthen your faith, and remind you each day that our greatest hope is not found in the kingdoms of this world, but in the coming King of kings and Lord of lords.

Until the next chapter...

Keep looking up.

In Christ,

Dr. Paul Crawford

A Closing Prayer

“Father, I thank You for every reader who has walked through these pages. For the one who does not yet know You, I pray they would hear Your voice and receive Your Son, Jesus, as Lord and Savior. For the one who already believes, I pray You would set their heart ablaze with urgency—to speak, to share, to love, and to never be silent. May we all live as faithful watchmen, sounding the trumpet until the day You call us home. In Jesus’ mighty name, Amen.”

THE BIBLE WAY TO HEAVEN

1. Admit you are a sinner.

"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

No one is good enough to go to Heaven on his own merit.

No matter how much good we do, we still come short.

2. Realize the penalty for sin.

"For the wages of sin is death..." (Romans 6:23a)

Just as there are wages for good, there is punishment for wrong.

The penalty for our sin is eternal death in a place called Hell.

3. Believe that Jesus Christ died, was buried, and rose again for you.

"That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved." (Romans 10:9)

4. Trust Christ alone as your Saviour.

"...But the gift of God is eternal life though Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 6:23b)

"For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Romans 10:13)

Eternal life is a gift purchased by the blood of Jesus and offered freely to those who call upon Him by faith.

Anyone who believes on the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved forever. Being saved is a one-time event.

Dr. Paul Crawford is more than just a Christian Author; His books are a source of inspiration and guidance on your spiritual journey. His books are created with a deep sense of faith and a desire to uplift and inspire all who read.

ASHES OF AMERICA:
AFTER THE VANISHING

THE RAPTURE WAS ONLY THE BEGINNING.
SURVIVAL IS NOT ENOUGH.

At 3:17 p.m., millions vanished. In a moment, the world was forever changed.
The Church was gone. Families were torn apart.
Within hours, foreign nations launched a coordinated
nuclear strike against America's greatest cities.
Twenty-three major cities were reduced to ashes.
The grid failed. Communication died.
Lawlessness spread like wildfire.

But in the small town of **Ashwood, Ohio—population 18,000—**
survival is only the first battle.
Neighbors become enemies. Towns go to war.
Food is worth more than gold.
And a new world leader promises peace...
if the world will surrender.

Amid the chaos, a remnant of believers clings to the truth.
They know the Rapture was real.
They know what is coming.
Now they must decide:

WILL THEY STAND FOR CHRIST WHEN EVERYTHING ELSE FALLS?

†

"A gripping, biblically grounded, edge-of-your-seat story that will challenge your faith and stir your heart."
—JERRY B. JENKINS, *Best-Selling Author*

"A must-read for anyone who believes we are living in the days leading up to Christ's return."
—TOM HORN, *Best-Selling Author and Prophecy Expert*

"Powerful, prophetic, and profoundly moving. This is more than fiction—this is a wake-up call."
—DR. DAVID JEREMIAH, *Pastor and Author*

PRAISE FOR DR. PAUL CRAWFORD

- Over 100 Christian books written on Bible prophecy, theology, and Christian living
- Verse-by-verse commentaries on every book of the Bible
- Committed to teaching the unchanging Word in an ever-changing world
- A voice of truth for this generation

THE ASHES OF AMERICA SERIES

SEVEN BOOKS. ONE REMNANT. ONE HOPE.

Before the Tribulation ends, every heart will be tested.
Every choice will matter. Every soul will count.