

PRIVATE EYES: THEY'RE WATCHING YOU

— EVERY SECRET LEAVES A TRAIL. EVERY LIE HAS A WITNESS. —

SOME TRUTHS
WERE NEVER MEANT
TO COME OUT.

BOOK ONE:
— THE MISSING WITNESS —

THE EYE
IS EVERYWHERE.



BUT GOD SEES
EVERYTHING.

LUKE 12:2

For there is nothing
covered, that shall not
be revealed; neither
hid, that shall not
be known.

A BENTLEY BLACKWOOD INVESTIGATION

DR. PAUL CRAWFORD



They are
watching
everyone.

JOURNALIST
VANISHES BEFORE
BREAKING STORY

CROSS
GLOBAL
TECHNOLOGIES

THE CROSS FILE



PRIVATE EYES: THEY'RE WATCHING YOU

Book One: The Missing Witness

A Bentley Blackwood Investigation

By Dr. Paul Crawford

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Preface

Welcome to the world of **Private Eyes: They're Watching You**.

For centuries, people have been fascinated by mysteries. We are captivated by detectives who solve impossible crimes, investigators who uncover hidden truths, and ordinary people who find themselves caught in extraordinary circumstances. There is something within each of us that longs to know what is hidden and to bring darkness into the light.

This series was born from that fascination—but with a greater purpose.

While **Private Eyes: They're Watching You** is filled with suspense, danger, conspiracies, and unforgettable investigations, it is ultimately a story about a much deeper truth. Every mystery Bentley Blackwood solves points beyond fingerprints, evidence, and criminal motives to the greatest reality of all: God sees what no one else can see.

The Bible reminds us:

"For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known." — **Luke 12:2**

Bentley Blackwood is a man who has dedicated his life to uncovering secrets. As a former FBI behavioral analyst turned private investigator, he has learned to trust facts, logic, and evidence. Yet beneath his confidence lies a wounded heart that has quietly drifted from the God he once knew. He can solve the mysteries of others while remaining blind to the emptiness within his own soul.

That is where his greatest investigation begins.

Throughout this twenty-book series, Bentley will pursue missing persons, expose murderers, dismantle criminal organizations, and uncover conspiracies that stretch farther than he ever imagined. Each case

will be resolved, bringing justice to victims and exposing evil. Yet every investigation also leaves behind another clue—one more piece of evidence pointing toward the powerful and elusive Damian Cross.

What Bentley does not realize is that he is assembling the greatest case of his career. Every witness, every document, every encrypted file, and every sacrifice will eventually become part of **The Cross File**, the evidence that could bring down a man whose influence reaches into the highest levels of business, technology, and government.

But this series is about more than the pursuit of a criminal.

It is about the pursuit of truth.

Our world has become increasingly connected through technology. Cameras watch our streets. Satellites observe our movements. Phones record our locations. Computers collect our information. Every day we hear more about surveillance, artificial intelligence, cybercrime, misinformation, and the loss of privacy. While these realities provide an intriguing backdrop for suspense, they also raise timeless questions:

Who can be trusted?

What is truth?

Can justice prevail when evil hides behind wealth, influence, and deception?

Scripture gives us the answer. No matter how carefully people conceal their sins, no matter how much power they possess, and no matter how sophisticated their schemes become, nothing escapes the eyes of Almighty God.

The greatest detective will never discover every secret.

The greatest government will never solve every crime.

The greatest technology will never know every thought.

But God already does.

As you journey through these pages, I hope you will enjoy the suspense, the investigations, and the unexpected twists. I hope Bentley Blackwood becomes a character you cheer for, even as he struggles with grief, doubt, and the search for purpose.

More importantly, I hope these stories remind you that while people may deceive one another, while evil may seem to prosper for a season, and while darkness may appear overwhelming, the truth always belongs to God.

The cases may be fictional.

The mysteries may be imagined.

But the spiritual truths woven throughout these pages are eternal.

Thank you for opening this first case file.

The investigation begins now.

May it not only entertain you but also encourage you to seek the One who is Himself "**the way, the truth, and the life**" (John 14:6).

Welcome to Blackwood Investigations.

The first case is waiting.

— **Dr. Paul Crawford**

Prologue

Three Days Before Emily Carter Disappeared

The rain fell in sheets across the deserted streets, washing the city in silver beneath the glow of flickering streetlights.

Emily Carter pulled her hood tighter around her face as she hurried across the parking lot toward her car. She glanced over her shoulder for what felt like the hundredth time that evening.

Someone was following her.

She couldn't prove it.

Not yet.

Her years as an investigative journalist had taught her that instincts mattered. When enough powerful people wanted the truth buried, paranoia often became survival.

She unlocked her car, climbed inside, and immediately locked the doors. Her trembling hands rested on the steering wheel while she forced herself to breathe.

Then she looked at the passenger seat.

A plain brown envelope.

She knew she hadn't left it there.

With cautious hands she opened it.

Inside were several photographs.

The first showed a man entering a government building.

The second showed executives leaving the headquarters of Cross Global Technologies.

The third stopped her cold.

It was a photograph of her.

Taken that very afternoon.

On the back, written in black ink, were four chilling words.

WE ARE WATCHING YOU.

Emily swallowed hard.

The envelope contained one more item—a small flash drive.

She hurried home without stopping, checking her mirrors every few seconds.

When she reached her apartment, she locked every door, closed every blind, and inserted the drive into her laptop.

A folder appeared.

Its title read:

PROJECT: THE EYE

Dozens of encrypted files filled the screen.

Financial transactions.

Government contracts.

Surveillance reports.

Photographs.

Employee lists.

Private communications.

The deeper Emily searched, the more impossible it became to deny the truth.

Cross Global Technologies was not simply developing security software.

It was building something much larger.

A system capable of monitoring millions of people.

A network that reached into businesses, government agencies, financial institutions, transportation systems, and communication providers.

Every page she opened revealed another layer of deception.

Every document connected back to one name.

Damian Cross.

Emily leaned back in disbelief.

"If this is real..."

She couldn't finish the sentence.

A soft vibration interrupted her thoughts.

Her cell phone lit up.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

She hesitated before answering.

"Hello?"

Silence.

Then a calm, measured voice spoke.

"Miss Carter..."

The man's voice was almost pleasant.

"You've been asking questions that don't belong to you."

Emily said nothing.

"You have something that belongs to us."

Her heart pounded.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do."

The call ended.

Within seconds every light in her apartment went dark.

The power had been cut.

Emily froze.

Outside her window, headlights slowly rolled into the parking lot.

A black SUV.

Then another.

Men stepped out.

All dressed in black.

All moving with military precision.

Emily grabbed her laptop, the flash drive, and her leather notebook.

She rushed toward the bedroom, pulled a loose floorboard from beneath the bed, and hid the flash drive inside a small metal box.

Next to it she placed a handwritten note.

If anything happens to me... find Bentley Blackwood.

She nailed the board back into place just as someone pounded on the apartment door.

BANG!

"Miss Carter!"

Another strike shook the frame.

"We need to speak with you."

She backed toward the fire escape.

The pounding grew louder.

Wood splintered.

The deadbolt groaned.

Emily climbed through the bedroom window into the cold rain.

She had only one chance.

One chance to disappear.

One chance to stay alive long enough to expose the truth.

As she reached the alley below, she glanced toward the rooftop across the street.

A lone figure stood beneath a black umbrella.

He wasn't chasing her.

He wasn't shouting.

He simply watched.

Even from a distance she could see the faint glow of the city's lights reflecting off his glasses.

He smiled.

Then he slowly raised one hand to his ear.

A voice echoed through the earpiece worn by every man searching below.

"Proceed."

The hunters spread through the streets.

Emily disappeared into the darkness.

The man beneath the umbrella turned away and walked toward a waiting limousine.

Before climbing inside, he looked back one final time.

"Run while you can," he whispered.

"You'll only delay the inevitable."

The limousine disappeared into the rain.

Far beneath the city, inside a secure data center filled with thousands of glowing monitors, a single red light blinked on.

A new file had been created.

SUBJECT: EMILY CARTER

STATUS: ACTIVE

And beside it, another file already existed.

Its contents had remained untouched for years.

SUBJECT: BENTLEY BLACKWOOD

STATUS: UNDER OBSERVATION

Neither of them knew it yet.

But the greatest investigation of Bentley Blackwood's life had already begun.

CHAPTER ONE

The Woman Who Vanished

"For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— Luke 12:2

The rain had not yet started, but Emily Carter could feel it coming the way she could feel most things before they arrived — in the pressure behind her eyes, in the static hum along her arms, in the strange stillness that settled over the city of Ashford Falls an hour before the sky finally broke. She sat alone in the newsroom on the eleventh floor of the Ashford Herald building, the fluorescent lights humming above her like a chorus of tired insects, and she read her own words back to herself for the twentieth time.

THE EYE THAT NEVER SLEEPS: How Cross Global Technologies Is Watching Every Move You Make.

It was the best thing she had ever written. It was also, she suspected, the last thing she would ever write, though she pushed that thought away every time it surfaced, the way she had been pushing it away for three weeks.

Emily was twenty-nine years old, and she had wanted to be a journalist since she was eleven, since the summer her father — a police sergeant named Frank Carter — had let her ride along in his cruiser and she'd watched him take a report from a woman who had been cheated out of her life savings by a man in an expensive suit. Nobody else believed the woman. Frank believed her. He wrote it all down, every word, and three months later the man in the expensive suit went to prison. Emily had decided that day that writing things down was a kind of justice. If you wrote the truth down carefully enough, and loudly enough, eventually someone had to listen.

She had not expected the truth to be this heavy.

For six months she had followed a trail that began with a single anonymous tip — a data engineer named Rodriguez who could not sleep at night because of what he had helped build — and ended here, at 11:42 p.m., with three hundred pages of internal memos, financial transfers, and technical specifications sitting on a flash drive in her desk drawer, and a headline that would go live at six o'clock the next morning whether Damian Cross liked it or not.

And Damian Cross, Emily had come to understand over the last six months, did not like very many things at all.

"The wicked flee when no man pursueth: but the righteous are bold as a lion."

— **Proverbs 28:1**

She thought of that verse now, sitting in the empty newsroom, and she almost smiled. She did not feel like a lion. She felt like a woman who had not slept properly in nineteen days, who jumped at the sound of the elevator, who had started checking the peephole of her apartment door three times before she went to bed. But she had underlined that verse in her Bible two nights ago, in the small apartment on Sycamore Street, and she had prayed over it until the fear loosened its grip enough that she could breathe.

She was afraid. She would not have denied it if anyone had asked her. But she had decided, somewhere in the last six months, that being afraid and being faithful were not opposites. Her mother had taught her that. Grace Carter had a whole life built out of trusting God in rooms that offered no other reason for hope, and Emily had watched her do it for twenty-nine years — through Frank's dangerous years on the force, through the lean years after his injury, through every ordinary and extraordinary trial a family could survive. Faith, her mother always said, was not the absence of fear. It was deciding Who was bigger than the thing you were afraid of.

Emily closed her laptop. The story was scheduled. It would post automatically at 6:00 a.m. regardless of what happened to her between now and then — she had made sure of that three days ago, quietly, without telling her editor why she wanted the delay function enabled.

Some instinct she couldn't name had told her to build in insurance. She was glad now that she had listened to it.

She gathered her things: a worn leather satchel, her phone, the small blue notebook she carried everywhere, filled with a shorthand only she could fully decode. She did not put the flash drive in the satchel. She had already hidden that, two days earlier, somewhere no one would think to look — not even, she thought with a small pang of guilt, her own parents.

On her way out, she stopped at her desk one last time and opened the top drawer. Inside was a small leather Bible, its cover soft and cracked from years of use, a gift from her grandmother the day Emily was confirmed. She opened it to Luke, chapter twelve, and read the verse again, the one she had underlined in blue ink so many times the paper had gone thin.

"For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— **Luke 12:2**

She left the Bible open on her desk, face down, spine cracked to that page, and she did not know — could not have known — that this small and ordinary act of faith would become, in a matter of hours, the first thread in an investigation that would consume the next twenty years of another person's life.

She rode the elevator down alone. The lobby was empty except for a night security guard named Curtis, who lifted two fingers off his coffee cup in a lazy salute and told her to get home safe. She told him she would. She believed it when she said it.

Outside, the rain had finally begun, fine and cold, needling against the streetlights. Emily pulled her coat tighter and walked the four blocks to where she'd parked her car, her sneakers slapping softly against the wet pavement, her breath fogging in front of her. She did not notice the black sedan idling across the street from the parking garage. Or perhaps she did notice it, and some old, animal part of her decided not to let herself acknowledge what she was seeing, because

acknowledging it would have meant running, and there was nowhere left to run that Damian Cross's eyes did not already reach.

At 12:14 a.m., Emily Carter sent one final text message to her mother.

Can't sleep. Love you both. Whatever happens, remember Luke 12:2. Nothing stays hidden forever. Not even from the people who think they're the only ones watching.

Grace Carter did not see the message until 6:40 the next morning, because she had gone to bed at ten and did not, as a rule, sleep with her phone beside her pillow. By the time she read it, her daughter had already been gone for six hours.



The Ashford Herald's night editor, a weary, kind man named Douglas Feeney, arrived at 5:45 a.m. as he did every weekday, coffee in hand, to make sure the morning's stories had posted correctly before the day staff came in. He pulled up the queue on his monitor and saw Emily's story sitting there, green light, scheduled, ready to fire at six sharp. He smiled. He had read an early draft two weeks earlier and told her it might be the most important thing the Herald had ever published. He picked up his phone to text her congratulations before the world caught fire around her.

The text did not go through. Not undelivered — just unanswered. He did not think much of it. Reporters slept in on the days their biggest stories dropped. He assumed she'd earned the rest.

By nine o'clock, the story had been read four hundred thousand times, picked up by two national outlets, and mentioned in a testy non-denial from a spokesperson for Cross Global Technologies. By ten o'clock, Emily's editor-in-chief, a sharp, no-nonsense woman named Priya Anand, began calling Emily's cell to talk through the fallout and start planning the follow-up piece. The calls went straight to voicemail. All four of them.

By noon, Priya was worried enough to drive to Emily's apartment on Sycamore Street herself.

The car was still in its spot below the parking garage, dew beading on the windshield, exactly where Emily always left it. The apartment door was locked. The lights were off. The bed had not been slept in — Priya knew Emily's habits well enough to know that the neat, military corners of an unused bed looked nothing like the sleep-tossed bed of a woman rushing out the door. On the kitchen counter sat a mug of tea, cold, half-finished, a faint ring of condensation dried around its base. Emily's phone sat beside it, plugged into the charger, its screen dark and locked.

A woman does not leave her phone behind. Not this woman. Not on this morning.

Priya called the police at 12:52 p.m.

"The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit."

— Psalm 34:18



Detective Raymond Delgado of the Ashford Falls Police Department stood in the doorway of Emily Carter's apartment at four o'clock that afternoon with the particular expression of a man who had already made up his mind and was only going through the motions of appearing otherwise. He was not a bad detective. He was, in fact, a fairly good one, twenty-two years on the job, a solid closure rate, well liked by the men and women who worked under him. But he had also worked in Ashford Falls long enough to know which cases were worth fighting for and which cases were not worth the political cost of fighting for them, and something about the folder that had landed on his desk that morning — a name, a company, a phone call from someone several pay grades above him suggesting the department "not get ahead of the facts" — told him exactly which category this one belonged to.

"Look," he said to Priya Anand, not unkindly, "she published a story that's going to make her famous. Reporters do this. They go dark for a few days after a big piece drops. Avoid the noise. Maybe she's at a cabin somewhere with her phone off."

"She left her phone here," Priya said. "On the charger. Locked. Her car is downstairs. Her bed hasn't been slept in."

"People act unpredictably under stress, ma'am."

"She wasn't under stress. She was prepared. She'd been building to this story for six months."

Delgado made a note in a small pad, more for show than for record. "I'll file it as a missing person. Twenty-four-hour flag. But I'll tell you honestly — nine times out of ten these are voluntary. Especially with someone like her. High-profile story, big company on the other end of it, maybe she got spooked and decided to disappear for a while until things cool down. Wouldn't be the first journalist to pull a runner after they poke a bear."

"Damian Cross is not a bear, Detective. He's a billionaire who just got called a criminal by four hundred thousand readers before lunch."

"All the more reason a smart woman might want to be somewhere nobody can find her for a little while," Delgado said, and he said it the way a man says something he has decided to believe because believing the alternative would require more of him than he was prepared to give.

Frank and Grace Carter arrived at their daughter's apartment forty minutes later, having driven the two hours from their home in Millbrook the moment Priya's call reached them. Frank Carter had been a police sergeant for twenty-six years before a knee injury forced his retirement, and he walked into that apartment the way he had walked into a thousand others over the course of his career — eyes moving methodically across the room, cataloguing, assessing, refusing to let his heart get ahead of his training. But this time his heart got ahead of his training within about eleven seconds, because this was not a stranger's apartment. This was his daughter's coffee mug on the counter. This was his daughter's Bible, left open on her desk at the newsroom, which

Priya had photographed and shown him on her phone in the elevator up. This was his daughter's bed, made with the same neat corners Grace had taught her to make as a girl, untouched since the morning before.

"Voluntary disappearance," Frank repeated, when Delgado told him the department's working theory, and something in his voice made the younger detective take an unconscious step backward. "Detective, I spent twenty-six years working cases in this city. I know voluntary disappearance when I see it, and I know when I'm looking at something else. My daughter does not leave her phone. She does not leave her car. She does not leave —" his voice caught, and he had to stop and press two fingers hard against the bridge of his nose before he could finish — "she does not leave her Bible open on a desk unless someone interrupted her before she could close it."

"Mr. Carter, I understand this is difficult—"

"Don't tell me what's difficult," Frank said quietly. "Tell me what you're going to do."

What the Ashford Falls Police Department did, over the following seventy-two hours, was very little. A patrol car drove past the apartment twice a day. A junior detective made two phone calls to Emily's known associates and got two answering machines. The case was logged, flagged, and — Frank Carter would later learn, with a bitterness that never fully left him — quietly deprioritized after a call from the mayor's office noted that Cross Global Technologies was headquartered in Ashford Falls, employed eleven thousand people in the metro area, and had, that same week, announced a four-hundred-million-dollar expansion of its downtown campus.

Grace Carter did not rage the way her husband did. She grieved differently. On the second night, unable to sleep, she sat at her kitchen table with her own Bible open in front of her, tears falling silently onto the pages, and she prayed the way she had prayed through every hard season of her life — out loud, alone, unashamed.

"Lord, You know where she is," Grace whispered into the empty kitchen. "You see her right now, wherever she is, whatever's happening to her. Nothing is hidden from You. Nothing is

too dark for Your light to reach. I don't know who to trust in this world anymore, God, but I trust You. Send someone. Send someone who will look for my daughter the way You are looking for her."

"He telleth the number of the stars; he calleth them all by their names."

— Psalm 147:4



Bentley Blackwood's office occupied the third floor of a converted brick warehouse on Larkspur Street, a part of Ashford Falls that had once been full of textile mills and was now full of the kind of small, unglamorous businesses that did not advertise — bail bondsmen, process servers, a locksmith who never seemed to have customers but never seemed to close either. The sign on Bentley's door read simply BLACKWOOD INVESTIGATIONS, no tagline, no promise of discretion or results, because Bentley had long ago decided that a man's reputation should do the advertising his signage did not.

And his reputation, in certain circles, was considerable.

He was thirty-eight years old, though the gray threading through his dark hair at the temples made him look older to strangers and younger to the handful of people who actually knew him well enough to understand what those years had cost. He was tall, lean in the deliberate way of a man who trained not for appearance but for readiness, and he wore, as he did most days, a black suit with no tie, the jacket slightly worn at the cuffs because he had never seen the point in replacing something that still functioned. His eyes were a pale, piercing blue, the kind of eyes that made suspects in interrogation rooms confess things they had sworn they would take to their graves, not because Bentley threatened them, but because he simply waited, silent and immovable, until the silence itself became unbearable.

On the desk in front of him, beside a case file he had just closed — an insurance fraud investigation that had taken him four days to unravel, when the company's own investigators had

spent four months getting nowhere — sat a small gold pocket watch, its case worn smooth from handling. He was not, in fact, using it to check the time. He rarely opened it at all. He simply liked to know it was there, the way another man might like to know a photograph was in his wallet.

It had belonged to Rachel.

Bentley did not think about Rachel during working hours if he could help it, which was itself a kind of discipline, because there had been a period of nearly a year, six years ago now, when he had not been able to think about anything else. Rachel Blackwood had been an investigative journalist too, though he never let himself dwell on the coincidence of what his life had become since her death. She had been killed during an investigation of her own — the official report called it an accident, a car that lost control on a wet mountain road outside the city, no other vehicle involved, no evidence of foul play. Bentley, who had spent nine years as an FBI behavioral analyst before opening his own agency, had gone over that accident report so many times he could recite it from memory, looking for the seam, the inconsistency, the thing that didn't fit. He had never found one. Not because it wasn't there, he sometimes thought in his darkest hours, but because whoever had built that accident had built it well enough that even he couldn't see through it.

He had stopped going to church four months after the funeral. He had stopped praying two months before that, somewhere around the point where he realized that every prayer he sent up came back to him unanswered and he decided the more honest use of his time was investigation, not supplication. Evidence, at least, did not require faith. Evidence simply was, waiting to be found by anyone patient enough and skilled enough to find it.

If I cannot prove it, it cannot be true. He had built the second half of his life on that sentence the way another man might build his life on a marriage vow.

A knock sounded at the outer door.

"It's open," Bentley called, without looking up from the report he was finishing.

The man who entered first was in his sixties, broad-shouldered despite a visible limp, with the upright bearing of someone who had spent a career standing at attention even when no one was watching. Bentley clocked him in under three seconds — former law enforcement, likely a sergeant or above given the way he held eye contact without deference, the knee injury probably the reason for an early retirement rather than age, and grief, recent and enormous, sitting behind his eyes like a stone he had not yet learned how to carry. The woman behind him moved more gently, her hand resting on her husband's arm less for support than for the simple human need to be touching someone who understood, her face lined with two days of crying she had mostly, but not entirely, gotten under control. She wore a small gold cross at her throat.

"Mr. Blackwood," the man said. "My name is Frank Carter. This is my wife, Grace. Our daughter is missing, and the police have decided she doesn't want to be found."

Bentley gestured to the two chairs across from his desk. "Sit down, Mr. Carter. Tell me what happened."

"When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up."

— Psalm 27:10



It took Frank twenty minutes to lay out the facts, and Bentley listened to all of them without interrupting, the way he always listened — perfectly still, eyes fixed somewhere just past the speaker's shoulder, a habit that unnerved people until they understood it meant he was building a picture, not performing sympathy. He asked no questions until Frank finished, and then he asked twelve of them in rapid succession — about the phone, about the charger, about the car, about the last people to see Emily, about the exact wording of her final text message, about whether she had mentioned feeling watched or followed in the weeks before, about whether the police had pulled security footage from the newsroom building or the parking garage.

"They haven't pulled anything," Frank said, and his jaw tightened. "Twenty-two years I wore a badge in this city, Mr. Blackwood. I know what a real investigation looks like, and I know what it looks like when somebody upstairs has quietly decided a case isn't worth the trouble. This is the second one."

"You think someone told them to back off."

"I think Cross Global Technologies employs eleven thousand people in this city and my daughter just published four hundred pages of evidence that its founder is building a surveillance operation big enough to watch every last one of them, plus half the country besides. I think the mayor's office made a phone call, and I think Detective Delgado is a decent enough man who's been handed an indecent set of instructions."

Bentley turned this over. It fit a pattern he had seen before — not often, but often enough to recognize its shape. Powerful interests, quiet pressure, a case allowed to go cold not through incompetence but through calculated neglect. It was, he thought, a more efficient form of corruption than the obvious kind, because no one could ever quite prove it had happened.

"Mrs. Carter," he said, turning his attention to Grace, who had said almost nothing since sitting down. "You haven't spoken much. Is there something you want to add?"

Grace looked up, and Bentley saw in her face the particular steadiness of a person whose grief had not hollowed her out but had, somehow, made her more solid. "Emily left something behind," she said. "A Bible, open on her desk at the newsroom, to a specific verse. Priya — her editor — photographed it before anyone thought to move it. Emily has read that Bible every day of her life since she was a girl. She did not leave it open by accident, Mr. Blackwood. She left it open because she wanted someone to find it that way."

Bentley's expression did not change, but internally he filed the detail with interest — not because he shared Grace Carter's conviction about its meaning, but because an open book, left deliberately at a specific page, was exactly the kind of behavioral marker he had spent nine years at the Bureau learning to read. People under threat left signs. Sometimes they didn't even know they were leaving them. "Which verse," he said.

"Luke, chapter twelve, verse two," Grace said, and she recited it from memory, her voice steady even as her eyes filled again. "For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

Bentley wrote it down. Not because he believed, as Grace clearly did, that the verse itself carried some kind of divine instruction. He wrote it down because a missing woman had left a message, and messages — coded, deliberate, purposeful — were the exact currency Bentley Blackwood had built an entire career trading in.

"I have to tell you something before you decide whether you want to hire me," Bentley said, folding his hands on the desk. "I don't work miracles. I don't work off hope, or intuition, or gut feelings. I work off evidence — what's provable, what's demonstrable, what can be traced and documented and laid out in a line that leads somewhere. If your daughter left, on her own, to hide from something dangerous, I will find her and I will find out why. If someone took her, I will find that too, and I will find who did it. But I won't tell you things are going to be fine simply because that's what you need to hear right now. I'd rather you trust the truth than trust me."

Grace held his gaze for a long moment, and something in her expression softened — not with pity, Bentley noted, but with something closer to recognition. "Mr. Blackwood," she said gently, "I don't need you to have faith. I have enough for both of us. I just need you to look."

It was such a small sentence. Bentley would remember it, months and then years later, as the moment the case — and everything that came after it — truly began.

"Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you."

— **Matthew 7:7**



Bentley took the case.

He named his fee, which was substantial, and Frank Carter did not blink at the number — a man who had spent his savings on his daughter's education was not going to hesitate spending the rest of it to find her. Bentley told them what he needed: full access to Emily's apartment, her newsroom desk, her known contacts, her financial and phone records if the family could authorize release of them, and forty-eight hours before he would give them any kind of preliminary read on what he was seeing.

"Forty-eight hours," Frank repeated. "Detective, my daughter could be—"

"I know what your daughter could be, Mr. Carter," Bentley said, not unkindly, but without softening it either. "That's exactly why I'm not going to waste the next forty-eight hours telling you things I haven't confirmed. I'm going to spend them finding out what's true."

After the Carters left, Bentley sat alone in his office for a long time, the case file blank in front of him except for a single line he had written across the top of a fresh legal pad: E. CARTER — MISSING. He looked at the pocket watch on his desk, turned it once in his fingers, and set it back down without opening it.

He picked up his phone and called a number he still knew by heart after six years of not officially working with the woman on the other end of it.

"Sarah," he said, when she picked up on the third ring. "I need everything the department has on a missing person's case out of the twelfth precinct — Emily Carter, journalist, filed within the last three days. And I need to know why it's already gone cold."

There was a pause on the line, and then a low, familiar laugh. "You're welcome, by the way. It's good to hear your voice too, Bentley."

"Sarah."

"I'll see what I can pull. You're not officially cleared for department files anymore, you know. Not since you decided the Bureau wasn't worth your talents."

"I decided the Bureau wasn't worth compromising for," Bentley said. "There's a difference."

Another pause, gentler this time. "How are you doing? Really."

"I'm working a case," Bentley said, which was, as Sarah Whitman had learned over eight years of friendship, Bentley Blackwood's answer to nearly every question about his own well-being. "A journalist named Emily Carter published a story about Cross Global Technologies last night and vanished a few hours before it went live. Her parents think she was taken. The department's treating it as voluntary."

There was a longer pause this time, long enough that Bentley almost asked if the call had dropped.

"Cross Global Technologies," Sarah said finally, her voice different now — careful, quieter. "Bentley, I read that story this morning before I came in. Everyone in the building read that story this morning. If half of what she wrote is true, that company has resources most federal agencies would envy. If they're the reason she's missing—"

"I know."

"I'm serious. This isn't a cheating-husband case. This isn't insurance fraud. If you're right, you're about to make an enemy with more money and more reach than anyone you have ever gone up against, including some of the men we put away at the Bureau."

Bentley looked out his office window at the gray evening settling over Larkspur Street, at the lights beginning to flicker on in the buildings across the way, and thought of Grace Carter's face — the steadiness of it, the terrible, patient hope in it — and Frank Carter's voice cracking over the words she does not leave her Bible open. He thought, too, though he would not have admitted it aloud to anyone, of another car on another wet road, six years gone, and a report he had never quite been able to close.

"Then I suppose," he said, "I'd better be careful."

He hung up the phone, pulled a fresh manila folder from his desk drawer, and wrote across the tab in even, deliberate letters: THE CARTER CASE. He did not know yet — could not have known — that this folder would be the first of twenty, that the name he would find hidden behind Emily Carter's disappearance would follow him through every case he took for the

next two decades, or that the small Bible verse Grace Carter had recited to him with such quiet certainty would turn out to be less a clue than a kind of prophecy.

He only knew that a woman was missing, that the people who should have been looking for her had stopped, and that somewhere in Ashford Falls, in an apartment on Sycamore Street, the truth was waiting to be uncovered by whoever was patient enough, and stubborn enough, to go looking for it.

Outside, the rain that had begun the night Emily disappeared had not yet stopped. It fell steadily over the city — over the newsroom where her Bible still lay open on an abandoned desk, over the police precinct where her file sat quietly at the bottom of a stack, over the gleaming glass tower downtown where Damian Cross stood at his office window forty floors above the street, watching the storm move in, and over the small brick building on Larkspur Street where a man who did not believe in miracles had just agreed to search for one anyway.

"The eyes of the LORD are in every place, beholding the evil and the good."

— Proverbs 15:3

CHAPTER TWO

Blackwood Investigations

"He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds."

— Psalm 147:3

Bentley Blackwood did not sleep the night after the Carters left his office. This was not, in itself, unusual. He had never been a man who slept easily, not even before Rachel died, and in the six years since, sleep had become something he negotiated with rather than something he simply did. He lay in the dark of his apartment above the agency until well past three, staring at the ceiling, running the Carter case through his mind the way another man might run his fingers

over a rosary — not out of comfort, but out of the sheer compulsive need to keep turning the thing over until it revealed its shape.

At 5:50 a.m., he gave up on sleep entirely, dressed in the dark, and walked down the interior stairwell that connected his apartment to the office below. Blackwood Investigations occupied the entire third floor of the old Larkspur Street warehouse, but Bentley had converted a section of the second floor — what had once been a loading dock — into his living quarters years ago, in the months after Rachel's funeral, when the thought of living anywhere that had belonged to the two of them together had become physically unbearable. He told people it was for convenience. The truth was closer to the truth of a man who could not stand to be anywhere his work could not reach him, because his work was the only thing that had ever reliably answered back.



The Blackwood Investigations office did not look like the offices in the films Bentley occasionally caught fragments of on the rare nights he allowed himself a television. There was no dim lighting, no wall of red string connecting photographs, no bottle of scotch in the bottom drawer. The space was bright, exposed brick and factory windows, the original steel joists left visible overhead, and it was, above all things, organized — case files color-coded and shelved by year, a whiteboard wall wiped clean at the end of every closed investigation, three desks arranged in a loose triangle around a central table where the team gathered when a case required all of them at once.

Bentley had built the agency from nothing in the eighteen months after he left the Bureau, and in five years it had grown a reputation that reached well beyond Ashford Falls — a reputation built not on advertising, which he refused to do, but on results, which spoke for themselves in the particular circles where results mattered. He employed two people full-time, both of whom he trusted with a completeness he extended to almost no one else alive, which was

itself a strange irony, since trust was not a quality Bentley believed he possessed in any generous supply.

Mason Reyes arrived at 7:15, as he always did, wearing headphones around his neck and carrying a energy drink that Bentley had given up commenting on years ago. Mason was twenty-four, sharp-featured, with the restless energy of a man who had spent his adolescence doing things he was not legally permitted to do with a keyboard and had never entirely lost the habit of moving fast, thinking faster, and saying whatever occurred to him before better judgment could intervene.

"You look like something the cat rejected," Mason said, dropping into the chair at his desk, which was the only workstation in the office that did not look organized — three monitors, cables snaking in every direction, a small shrine of energy drink cans that Bentley periodically threatened to have hauled away.

"Good morning to you too."

"You've got the case-face on. The one where you didn't sleep because your brain wouldn't shut up about something." Mason spun once in his chair, appraising Bentley with the particular perceptiveness that had made him, despite his youth and his record, one of the best digital investigators Bentley had ever worked with. "New case?"

"New case."

"How new?"

"Emily Carter."

Mason went very still, which was, for Mason, a remarkable thing. "The journalist. The Cross Global story." He pulled up something on one of his monitors — Bentley didn't need to look to know it was the article, because half the internet had been looking at it since six o'clock the previous morning. "I read that thing twice. Whoever wrote it either didn't know how dangerous it was, or knew exactly how dangerous it was and wrote it anyway."

"Her parents think it's the second one," Bentley said. "I'm inclined to agree."

Mason turned fully around in his chair, and for a moment the sarcasm dropped away entirely, revealing the sharper, more careful person underneath it that Bentley had learned, over two years of working together, was the actual Mason Reyes — the one who had once hacked into a state database to expose a foster care system that was quietly losing track of children, the one who had spent eight months in a juvenile facility for it, and the one who had told Bentley, on the day Bentley hired him, that he had done it because nobody else was going to.

"You want me on her digital footprint," Mason said. It wasn't a question.

"Emails, financial records, phone logs — the department will have pulled some of it, but not enough, and not with the right questions attached. I want to know who she talked to in the last six months that she wasn't supposed to be talking to. I want her source protected as long as possible, but I want to know who it is."

"On it." Mason was already turning back to his monitors, fingers finding the keyboard with the unconscious fluency of a concert pianist. Then he paused. "Bentley. This is Cross Global. You understand that if I go digging around anything connected to The Eye, there's a real chance they see me digging."

"I understand."

"I'm not saying don't do it. I'm saying I want you to understand what I understand, so nobody's surprised later." Mason held his gaze a beat longer than usual, and Bentley recognized in it something that had nothing to do with fear and everything to do with the particular loyalty of a young man who had once been failed by every system meant to protect him and had decided, somewhere along the way, that Bentley Blackwood was not going to be one more.

"Understood," Bentley said again, and meant it differently this time.

Mason had come to Blackwood Investigations two years earlier under circumstances that would have disqualified him from almost any other agency in the country. He had been seventeen when the state came looking for him — a runaway juvenile detention record that read like a case study in a system too overwhelmed to notice one more kid falling through its cracks — and nineteen when he breached a database he had no legal right to touch, exposing thirty-one

children whose foster placements had gone unreviewed for years, some of them in homes no caseworker had visited since the paperwork was filed. He had not profited from what he found. He had mailed it, anonymously, to three newspapers and a state senator, and within a week the story had broken open a scandal that led to four arrests and, eventually, a piece of state legislation that bore no one's name but had quietly changed how thousands of children were tracked every year after.

It had also earned him eight months in a juvenile facility, because the law, Bentley had come to understand over the years, was frequently more interested in how a truth was uncovered than in whether it needed uncovering at all.

Bentley had read Mason's file during a different investigation entirely, a case that had briefly intersected with the same foster care scandal, and something about the boy's file — the surgical precision of what he'd done, paired with the complete absence of self-interest in why he'd done it — had stayed with Bentley for the better part of a year. He had tracked Mason down six months after his release, found him living out of a cousin's spare room in the industrial district, doing freelance security work for cash under a name that wasn't his own, and had offered him something no one else had bothered to offer a nineteen-year-old with a record: a legitimate use for a rare and considerable gift.

"Why me?" Mason had asked him then, sitting across a diner table from a man he'd never met, visibly waiting for the catch.

"Because you already know the difference between what's legal and what's right," Bentley had told him, "and most people twice your age have never bothered to learn it."

Mason had not smiled. He had simply nodded once, the particular nod of a young man unaccustomed to being taken seriously, and asked when he could start.

*"Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will
strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee."*

— **Isaiah 41:10**



Victoria Moreno arrived twenty minutes after Mason, precisely on schedule, as she always was, carrying a single folder and a coffee she had already finished. She was in her early forties, dressed with the quiet, unshowy precision of someone who had spent a career being underestimated by people who mistook her composure for coldness, and she moved through the office with the economy of a woman who did not waste steps any more than she wasted words.

Victoria had spent eleven years as a criminal behavioral analyst before Bentley recruited her, most of them working cases that involved the specific, patient cruelty of predators who did not look like predators — men who golfed with judges, women who ran charities, people whose evil wore expensive clothes and offered firm handshakes. She understood, better than almost anyone Bentley had ever known, the particular architecture of a mind that could do terrible things while believing itself entirely justified. It was Victoria who had taught Bentley, in their very first case together, that the most dangerous people were rarely the ones who knew they were monsters. The most dangerous people were the ones utterly convinced they were saving the world.

"Mason told me," she said simply, setting her folder on the central table. "Emily Carter."

"You've read the story."

"Everyone's read the story." Victoria pulled out a chair and sat, folding her hands in front of her. "I want to talk about Damian Cross before we talk about anything else, because I think you're underestimating what you're walking into, and I say that as someone who has watched you walk into a great many things other people were afraid to walk into."

Bentley leaned against the edge of his desk, arms crossed, and said nothing, which was his customary invitation for her to continue.

"I pulled everything public about him last night, after Mason called me. Damian Cross built Cross Global Technologies from a garage startup into a forty-billion-dollar company in fourteen years. He gives more to charity than almost anyone in this country. He's testified before

Congress twice about the responsible use of surveillance technology — and both times, Bentley, he was persuasive. Convincing. The kind of man who makes you believe he's the solution to the problem, right up until you find out he built the problem himself, brick by brick, so he could sell everyone the solution."

"That's a narcissist's profile."

"It's worse than that." Victoria's voice did not rise, but something in it sharpened. "A narcissist wants to be admired. A man like Cross wants to be necessary. He doesn't need you to love him. He needs you to believe you cannot survive without what he's built. That kind of conviction doesn't stop at boardrooms and charity galas. If he genuinely believes — and I think he does — that surveillance is salvation, that watching everyone is the only way to save them from themselves, then a journalist threatening to expose that vision isn't an inconvenience to him. She's a threat to what he considers the safety of the entire world. Men like that don't hesitate to remove threats. They consider it a mercy."

"For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God."

— 1 Corinthians 3:19

Bentley turned this over in silence for a long moment. Outside, the morning traffic on Larkspur Street had begun to pick up, the low hum of the city waking rising faintly through the old factory windows. "You're telling me to walk away from this."

"I'm telling you I don't think you will," Victoria said, "and I want you to walk into it with your eyes open instead of your jaw set. Those are different things, Bentley, even if you've spent six years treating them like they're the same."

It was, Bentley thought, exactly the kind of thing Victoria would say — precise, unflinching, entirely correct — and exactly the kind of thing he did not particularly want to hear at 7:40 in the morning on four hours of sleep. He did not argue with her, because arguing with Victoria Moreno about human behavior was a losing proposition for anyone who had not spent eleven years studying it professionally, himself included. He simply nodded once, filed the

warning where he filed all warnings that he intended to heed without discussing further, and reached for the case folder.



He had not told either of them, not yet, about the pocket watch.

It sat now in his jacket pocket, where he had put it before leaving his apartment that morning, though he could not have said exactly why he'd brought it down with him instead of leaving it on his desk where it usually stayed. He found his hand drifting toward the pocket more than once that morning, his fingers finding the familiar worn edges of it through the fabric, and each time he caught himself doing it, he made himself stop.

Rachel had given him very little in the way of physical belongings that survived her — she had not been a woman who accumulated things, had always said that possessions were a poor substitute for presence — but the watch had been an exception, a gift from her grandmother that she had carried in her own bag for years before she gave it to Bentley on their fifth wedding anniversary, three weeks before she died, with a small inscription added to the inside of the case that he had never shown anyone, not Sarah, not Victoria, not a living soul.

To B. — Time reveals what fear conceals. All my love, always, R.

He had not understood the inscription when she gave it to him. He had laughed, actually, a rare full laugh, and told her it sounded like something out of one of her articles, and she had smiled the particular smile she wore when she knew something he didn't yet, and told him he would understand it eventually. He had spent six years trying to decide whether she meant it as comfort or as prophecy, and some days he still wasn't sure which was worse.

Rachel Ellison Blackwood had been, in the small and exacting ways that mattered most, nothing like him and everything he needed. She had been a features writer when they met — human interest stories, the kind of gentle, patient journalism that took the time to sit with a grieving widow or a struggling single father until the real story surfaced, the one underneath the obvious one — and over the eleven years of their marriage she had slowly transitioned into

harder work, investigative pieces about corruption and cover-ups, work that put her in rooms with people who did not want to be written about. Bentley, then a rising behavioral analyst at the Bureau, had worried about her constantly and told her so constantly, and she had always answered him the same way.

"Somebody has to go looking, Bentley. If everyone stays safe, nobody ever finds the truth. And the truth is the only thing that ever actually sets anybody free."

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

— **John 8:32**

She had believed that with an unshakeable, uncomplicated faith that Bentley had loved and, if he was honest with himself in the rare moments he allowed himself to be, had never fully shared. Rachel prayed before every difficult interview. She kept a small Bible in her car and another on her nightstand, and she read from both of them the way other people checked the weather — a daily habit so ordinary it had taken Bentley years to notice how deeply it shaped everything else about her, the patience she extended to people who did not deserve it, the courage she found in situations that should have terrified her, the strange, stubborn peace she carried even into rooms full of danger.

"You don't have to be fearless to be faithful," she told him once, the same words, he would realize much later, that Grace Carter had echoed almost exactly in his office two days ago, though Grace could not have known it. "You just have to believe Someone bigger is already in the room."

Bentley had not believed that. He had told her, gently, more than once, that he believed in what he could verify — fingerprints, financial records, timelines that could be checked against other timelines — and that everything else was a comfort people told themselves to survive a world that did not owe them comfort. Rachel had never argued the point. She had simply smiled and told him that was all right, that faith was not a debate to be won, and that she would keep praying for him whether he asked her to or not.

She had been investigating a construction contractor with ties to several city officials when the accident happened — nothing, on its surface, resembling the scale of what Emily Carter had uncovered, a smaller story about a smaller kind of corruption, the sort of local piece Rachel had written a dozen times before without incident. She had been driving home from an interview on a rain-slicked mountain road outside the city at 9:40 on a Tuesday night, and her car had gone off the road at a curve she had driven a hundred times before, and by the time anyone found the wreckage the following morning, there was nothing left for Bentley to investigate except a report that told him everything and explained nothing.

No skid marks consistent with mechanical failure. No other vehicle involved. Weather and road conditions cited as contributing factors. Case closed.

Bentley had reopened it seventeen times in the six years since, in the privacy of his own office, late at night, when the rest of the agency had gone home and there was no one to see him pull the folder from the locked drawer where he kept it separate from every other file he owned. He had never found the seam. He had never found the piece that did not fit. And that failure — his own failure, the failure of the single most capable investigator he had ever known, applied without limit or mercy to the one case that had ever actually mattered to him — had done more to end his faith than any funeral homily or any silent, unanswered prayer ever could have.

If I cannot prove it, it cannot be true.

He had built that sentence out of Rachel's death the way another man might build a shrine, and he had lived inside it for six years, and it had never once, not on a single occasion, brought her back.

He had left the Bureau four months after the funeral, not because anyone asked him to, but because he had come to understand, sitting in briefing after briefing on cases that were not Rachel's case, that he could no longer do the work with the detachment it required. A behavioral analyst who could not stop seeing his own wife's face in every open file was not an asset to a task force. He handed in his resignation on a Tuesday morning, and his supervisor — a good man, one of the few who had tried, in the clumsy way institutions try, to help him through that

first terrible year — had not argued. He had simply shaken Bentley's hand and told him that grief was not a weakness, whatever the Bureau's culture might suggest otherwise, and that he hoped Bentley would find his way to using his gift again someday, somewhere it could do some good.

Sarah Whitman had been the only person at the Bureau who had actually fought him on it. She had come to his apartment the night before his last day, sat across from him at the small kitchen table Rachel had picked out at a flea market years earlier, and told him, with the blunt honesty that had made her one of the finest agents Bentley had ever partnered with, that running from grief by quitting the only structure that gave his days shape was not strength, it was just a slower kind of collapse.

"You're not the only person who's ever lost someone," she had told him, not unkindly. "You're just the only one who's decided losing her means you have to lose everything else too."

He had not spoken to her for almost three months after that conversation. When he finally called her again, it was to tell her he was opening his own agency, and she had not said I told you so, though she would have been entirely within her rights to. She had simply asked when she could see the office, and she had shown up two weeks later with a bottle of decent scotch and a case file from an old unsolved matter she thought his particular talents might finally crack. It had been, though neither of them ever named it that way, an act of faith in him that he had done very little, in the years since, to earn.

*"Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him: but I will maintain mine own ways
before him."*

— Job 13:15



At nine o'clock, Bentley called Mason and Victoria to the central table and laid out the Carter case in full — the timeline of Emily's disappearance, the abandoned phone and untouched bed, the department's convenient theory of voluntary flight, Frank Carter's certainty and Grace

Carter's quiet, unshakeable insistence that her daughter had left a message rather than an accident behind on that open Bible.

"Luke twelve two," Victoria repeated, when Bentley reached that part. "Nothing covered that won't be revealed."

"You think it means something," Mason said, not quite a question, watching Bentley's face.

"I think a woman who was afraid enough to build a delay function into her own article's publishing schedule was not the kind of woman who left things open by accident," Bentley said. "Whether the verse itself means anything is not something I'm equipped to evaluate. What I can evaluate is that it's a data point, and I don't discard data points because I find their packaging unfamiliar."

It was as close as Bentley Blackwood ever came to admitting uncertainty in front of his team, and both Mason and Victoria understood it as such, though neither of them remarked on it.

"So we're doing this," Mason said.

Bentley looked at the folder in front of him — MISSING: E. CARTER scrawled in his own handwriting across the tab — and thought, not for the first time that morning, of Sarah's warning on the phone the night before. You're about to make an enemy with more money and more reach than anyone you have ever gone up against. He thought of Victoria's assessment not twenty minutes earlier: he doesn't hesitate to remove threats, he considers it a mercy. He thought, unbidden, of a mountain road six years gone and a case file that had never once given up its secret no matter how many nights he had spent begging it to.

A wiser man, he thought, would close the folder. A wiser man would tell Frank and Grace Carter that their daughter's case belonged with a federal task force and better resources than one private agency in a converted warehouse could ever hope to bring to bear, and he would be right to say it, and he would sleep easier for having said it.

But Bentley thought, too, of Grace Carter's face across his desk. I don't need you to have faith. I have enough for both of us. I just need you to look. He thought of a Bible left open on a

desk by a woman who had understood, in whatever final moments she had before the world closed over her, that someone patient enough might eventually come looking for the trail she'd left behind. He thought, though he would have denied thinking it in exactly these terms, that he had spent six years failing to find the truth about the one woman he had loved most in the world, and that somewhere in that failure was a debt he had never found a way to repay — and that perhaps, just perhaps, the only way a man like him knew how to honor a promise he'd never gotten to keep was to keep it, however imperfectly, for someone else's daughter instead.

"We're doing this," he said. "Victoria, I want a full behavioral workup on everyone in Emily's orbit — sources, coworkers, anyone who had access to her draft before it published. Mason, dig into the digital trail, but carefully. If Cross Global is even half of what Emily's reporting says it is, assume every system you touch might be watching you touch it."

"And you?" Victoria asked.

Bentley stood, sliding the case folder under his arm, and reached, almost without thinking, for the pocket watch again, his thumb tracing its worn edge through the fabric of his jacket.

"I'm going to her apartment," he said. "I want to see the Bible for myself."

"Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding."

— Proverbs 3:5



Before he left, Bentley stopped at his own desk and, for reasons he did not entirely examine, opened the pocket watch for the first time in several months. The photograph inside the case had faded slightly over the years — Rachel on a beach somewhere in the early years of their marriage, laughing at something outside the frame, her dark hair blown sideways by a wind

Bentley could still, if he let himself, remember the exact temperature of. He looked at it for a long moment.

"I don't know what I'm walking into," he said quietly, to no one, to the empty office, to a woman six years gone who had never once, in eleven years of marriage, stopped believing that someone was listening even when Bentley was entirely certain no one was. "But I'm going to look anyway. The way you would have."

He closed the watch, slid it back into his pocket, and picked up his keys.

Behind him, at her desk, Victoria watched him go with the particular expression of a woman who understood more about the man in front of her than he had ever told her directly, and had long ago decided that some kinds of understanding were better held in silence than spoken aloud. Mason, headphones already back around his ears, one screen filling with lines of code that would, within the hour, begin quietly retracing Emily Carter's digital life, said nothing at all — but he glanced up once as the office door closed behind Bentley, and something in his young, sharp face looked, for just a moment, almost like hope.

Outside, the city of Ashford Falls carried on beneath a sky still heavy with yesterday's rain, indifferent to the fact that a man who had spent six years insisting he trusted nothing he could not prove had just agreed, in his own quiet and reluctant way, to go looking for something he could not yet see.

"For we walk by faith, not by sight."

— **2 Corinthians 5:7**

CHAPTER THREE

A Trail Left Behind

"For nothing is secret, that shall not be made manifest; neither any thing hid, that shall not be known and come abroad."

— Luke 8:17

Priya Anand met Bentley at the security desk of the Ashford Herald building at fifteen, exactly on time, dressed as though she had not gone home the night before, which — Bentley suspected correctly — she had not. She was a compact, sharp-eyed woman in her fifties with the particular exhaustion of someone who had spent a career fighting for column inches and had, in the last thirty-six hours, discovered that the fight had teeth she had never quite believed in.

"Detective Delgado's people came through yesterday afternoon," she said, leading him toward the elevator. "Took about eleven minutes. Photographed the desk, bagged nothing, told me not to move anything and then didn't seem particularly concerned whether I listened."

"Did you listen?"

"I photographed everything myself before they arrived, and I haven't let the cleaning staff near her desk since. I don't know what I'm protecting, Mr. Blackwood. I just know it felt like something worth protecting."

Bentley found that he approved of Priya Anand considerably.

Emily's desk sat in the northeast corner of the newsroom's eleventh floor, near a window that looked out over the gray sprawl of downtown Ashford Falls, close enough to Priya's own office that Bentley understood, without being told, that the seating arrangement had not been an accident. A mentor kept her best reporter close. He studied the desk for a long moment before he touched anything — a habit from his Bureau years that had never left him, the discipline of

reading a scene before disturbing it, because a crime scene told the truth exactly once, in its undisturbed state, and after that it only ever told you what you had already decided to believe.

A coffee mug, empty, a faint brown ring dried at its base. A laptop, closed, which Priya told him the department had already imaged and returned. A corkboard above the desk crowded with printouts, sticky notes in Emily's small, slanted handwriting, a printed photograph of Frank and Grace Carter at what looked like a lake house, smiling, sun-drenched, from some ordinary summer that had no idea what was coming. And in the center of the desk, exactly as Priya's photographs from two days earlier had shown it, a small leather Bible, cover soft with age, lying open and face-down, its spine cracked along a single page from years of being opened to that same place again and again.

Bentley lifted it carefully, using two fingers at the very edge of the cover, the way he had once lifted evidence in rooms far more dangerous than a newsroom cubicle, and turned it right-side up without losing the page.

Luke, chapter twelve. Verse two underlined in blue ink, the underline retraced so many times over what must have been years that the paper beneath it had gone soft and slightly translucent.

"For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— **Luke 12:2**

"She read this verse a lot," Bentley said. It was not a question.

"She quoted it to me once," Priya said, "about eight weeks into the Cross investigation, when I asked her if she was scared. She said, 'Everybody's scared, Priya. The only question is whether you let the fear decide what you do next.' Then she said something about how she believed the truth always came out eventually, one way or another, because God saw everything even when nobody else did, and she'd rather be the one who helped it come out than the one who spent her whole life waiting for someone else to do it." Priya folded her arms, looking at the

small worn book in Bentley's hands with an expression somewhere between grief and wonder. "I'm not a religious woman, Mr. Blackwood. But I've thought about that a great deal in the last two days."

Bentley did not answer that directly. He turned the Bible over in his hands once more, checking the spine, the inside cover, the flyleaf — a habit, not a hope, though he could not entirely account for the small, unfamiliar disappointment he felt when he found nothing else written there. He photographed the open page from three angles, noted the precise crease pattern of the spine, and set the Bible back exactly as he had found it.

"I need her apartment key," he said, "and I need you to write down, as precisely as you can remember, the exact time you last saw her before she left this building."

Before he left the newsroom, Bentley asked Priya one more question, almost as an afterthought, though nothing Bentley asked was ever truly an afterthought. "Did she have a routine? Something she did every day, without fail, the kind of habit a person barely notices in themselves because it's become invisible."

Priya thought about it for a moment. "She read something before she started writing. Every morning, first thing, before she touched her keyboard. I used to tease her about it — told her most reporters warmed up with coffee, not Scripture. She told me once that she couldn't write honestly about darkness unless she'd spent a few minutes first reminding herself that the darkness didn't get the last word." Priya's composure cracked, briefly, before she caught it again. "I didn't understand what she meant then. I think I'm starting to."

Bentley thanked her, took the security footage records Priya had already requested be preserved, and rode the elevator back down through eleven floors of a building that had watched Emily Carter build a career out of telling the truth, with no idea that the same building might be the last place she had stood as a free woman.

"The heart of man deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps."

— **Proverbs 16:9**



Emily's apartment occupied the second floor of a narrow brick building on Sycamore Street, four blocks from the newsroom, in a neighborhood of tree-lined streets and old converted houses that had, over the last decade, filled up with the kind of young professionals who wanted charm more than they wanted square footage. Frank Carter met him at the door, having driven back into the city that morning, and Bentley noted the dark circles beneath the older man's eyes, the particular stillness of a father holding himself together through sheer force of will.

"Grace couldn't come today," Frank said, unlocking the door. "She's praying instead. Says it's the only thing keeping her steady enough to be useful to anyone." He said it without apology, the way a man states a fact he has stopped questioning. "You want me in there with you, or you want to work alone?"

"Alone, if that's all right with you. I work slowly and I ask a lot of questions of a room that doesn't answer back out loud. It's not efficient to have company."

Frank studied him for a moment, and something in his expression — the same careful, assessing look Bentley recognized from twenty-six years of Frank's own career — settled into something like respect. "Twenty-six years on the job, I worked exactly the same way," he said. "I'll be in the car."

Bentley stood alone in the doorway for a long moment after Frank's footsteps faded down the stairwell, letting the apartment settle around him before he moved. It was a small space, neat in the particular way of someone who did not spend much time in it — a galley kitchen, a living room with a secondhand couch and two mismatched armchairs, a short hallway leading to a bedroom and a cramped office that had clearly once been intended as a second bedroom. Books everywhere: crime reporting, media law, a worn paperback Bible study guide, three different translations of Scripture stacked on the same shelf as back issues of investigative journalism quarterlies. A framed photograph on the living room wall of Emily as a young girl, sitting in the

passenger seat of a police cruiser, grinning at whoever held the camera, her father's badge pinned crookedly to her small chest.

"Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts."

— **Psalm 139:23**

Bentley began, as he always began, with the room a person would least expect to be searched — not the desk, not the obvious hiding places, but the bathroom, where people tended to believe, wrongly, that privacy was assumed rather than constructed. He found nothing there but ordinary things: toiletries, a prescription for a mild sleep aid filled two weeks earlier and barely touched, a small cross on a chain hanging from the mirror.

The bedroom yielded more. The bed, as Priya had described and the department's own report confirmed, was made with the flat, undisturbed precision of a bed no one had slept in for at least one night, possibly two. On the nightstand sat a second Bible, smaller than the one at the newsroom, a compact traveling edition with a cracked spine of its own — and Bentley felt something shift slightly in his chest, an old, unwelcome familiarity, when he opened it and found it, too, fell open naturally to the same page.

"For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— **Luke 12:2**

Two Bibles. Two copies of the same verse, worn into the same page through what must have been months, possibly years, of repeated return. Bentley stood very still in the quiet bedroom, turning that fact over with the same rigor he applied to any piece of evidence, and found himself, despite every professional instinct telling him not to, thinking of Rachel's own two Bibles — one for the car, one for the nightstand — a habit he had once found endearing and had never once, in eleven years of marriage, thought to ask her the reason for.

He set the thought aside. A pattern was not a coincidence merely because it touched something personal. He photographed the Bible, the underlined verse, the worn page, and returned it precisely to its place.

It was the closet that gave him what he was looking for.

Emily's closet was ordinary — clothes on hangers, a modest collection of shoes, a step stool pushed into the corner for reaching the upper shelf. But when Bentley knelt to examine the shoe boxes stacked along the closet floor, he noticed what a less patient investigator might have missed entirely: one box, labeled in Emily's handwriting as containing a pair of winter boots, was noticeably lighter than the others when he lifted it, its weight inconsistent with anything resembling footwear.

Inside, wrapped in a wool scarf, he found a small blue notebook, its cover worn soft from handling, its pages filled edge to edge with a dense, slanted shorthand that Bentley did not immediately recognize as any professional stenography system he had encountered in nine years at the Bureau. It was something Emily had built herself, he realized as he flipped carefully through the pages — a private cipher, likely developed over years of note-taking, dense enough that even a trained eye would need time and context to unravel it.

Tucked into the notebook's back cover, folded twice, was a single sheet of printer paper. Bentley unfolded it carefully.

It was a photograph, printed rather than developed, slightly grainy — the kind of image captured on a long lens from some distance and later enlarged. It showed a black sedan parked on an otherwise unremarkable street, and through its tinted windshield, barely visible but unmistakable once Bentley's eye adjusted to what he was looking at, the pale oval of a man's face, watching something outside the frame. In the corner of the photograph, small and easy to miss, was a symbol Bentley had never seen before — a circle bisected by a single vertical line, with three smaller marks radiating outward from its top like rays, stamped faintly onto what appeared to be the sedan's rear license plate frame.

"The eyes of the LORD are in every place, beholding the evil and the good."

— Proverbs 15:3

He photographed the symbol from every angle the light allowed, then sat back on his heels in the quiet of Emily's closet, turning the pieces over in his mind with the same disciplined patience he had once applied to interrogation rooms far more hostile than this one. A journalist afraid enough to build a delay function into her own publishing schedule. A journalist who hid a notebook inside a shoe box rather than leave it in an obvious desk drawer. A journalist who had, at some point in the last several weeks, photographed someone photographing her — and had kept the evidence, close enough to reach, far enough to hide.

She had known she was being watched. Not suspected. Known.



The office — the second bedroom converted into a workspace — took Bentley the better part of an hour. Emily's desktop computer sat dark and silent, already imaged by the department, its physical presence now more symbolic than useful. But it was the small details of the room that interested him more than the obvious ones: a corkboard identical in spirit to the one at her newsroom desk, crowded with printed emails, financial documents, a hand-drawn diagram connecting a dozen company names to a single node at its center — CROSS GLOBAL TECHNOLOGIES, underlined three times in red.

Beneath the desk, taped to the underside of the middle drawer in a place no casual search would think to check, Bentley found a small flash drive, no larger than his thumb, secured with a strip of packing tape that had clearly been applied and reapplied more than once, as though Emily had returned to check on it more than she strictly needed to.

He held it in his palm for a long moment. A flash drive alone told him nothing — it could contain the entirety of Emily's evidence against Damian Cross, or it could contain nothing more than old photographs and tax documents. But its hiding place told him everything he needed to

know for now: taped beneath a drawer, in an apartment its owner had grown afraid enough to photograph strangers watching, was not where a woman hid unimportant things.

He called Mason from the apartment's small kitchen, keeping his voice low out of a habit he could not entirely justify to himself, given that there was no one left in the apartment to overhear him.

"I've got a flash drive," he said, when Mason picked up. "Encrypted, I'd guess, given the effort she put into hiding it. I also have a notebook full of a private shorthand I can't read, and a photograph of a car with a symbol on it I've never seen before — a circle, a vertical line through the center, three marks radiating off the top like sunbeams, or maybe an eye with lashes, hard to say from the image quality."

There was a pause on the line, and then the particular quality of silence that meant Mason was typing rapidly on something Bentley couldn't see. "Send me the photo of the symbol first," Mason said. "That's fast to search. The drive I'll need in hand — if it's got real encryption on it, I'm not cracking that over the phone."

"I'll bring both back within the hour."

"Bentley." Mason's voice had lost its usual quickness. "A woman who builds her own shorthand and hides evidence under furniture isn't paranoid. She's trained herself to survive something. I don't love what that tells us about how scared she must have been before she vanished."

Bentley looked around the small, quiet office — the corkboard, the red-underlined name at the center of Emily's careful diagram, the empty chair where a determined young woman had spent countless nights building a case against a man with more resources than most nations — and found that he did not love it either.

*"Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not
pay."*

— Ecclesiastes 5:5



He found the last piece of the trail almost by accident, on his way out, when he paused in the living room to take a final photograph of the framed picture of young Emily in her father's cruiser. Behind the frame, wedged between the picture and the wall where it hung, was a single folded index card, easy to miss unless a person happened to be standing at precisely the angle Bentley now stood.

He worked it free carefully. In Emily's handwriting, small and urgent, clearly written in haste rather than with the careful deliberation of her notebook shorthand, were seven words.

If something happens — trust the verse. Not the man.

Bentley read it three times. Not the man. He turned the phrase over, testing it against everything he had learned in the apartment so far — the two Bibles, the hidden notebook, the photograph of surveillance she had somehow managed to capture herself, the encrypted drive taped beneath a drawer she must have known, on some level, might one day be searched by someone other than her. A journalist who trusted the truth to come out eventually did not leave contingency notes behind a picture frame unless she had already begun to suspect that trust alone might not be enough — that there might come a day when the people meant to look for her would need pointing in the right direction, away from whatever story they were told and toward whatever story was actually true.

Trust the verse. Not the man.

Which man, Bentley wondered, standing alone in the quiet apartment with the fading afternoon light slanting through the windows. Damian Cross, certainly — but something in the phrasing nagged at him, a specificity that felt aimed rather than general, as though Emily had a particular man in mind when she wrote it, someone closer to her than a billionaire she had never personally met. He photographed the card, sealed it in a small evidence bag from his jacket pocket, and stood for a moment longer in the stillness of the apartment, listening to nothing at all.

"Surely the Lord GOD will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets."

— Amos 3:7



Frank was waiting in the car when Bentley came down, engine off, hands folded in his lap in the particular posture of a man forcing himself to be patient. He looked up when Bentley opened the passenger door and sat, and something in Bentley's expression must have told him more than words would have, because Frank did not ask the obvious question first.

"You found something," he said instead.

"I found several somethings," Bentley said. "I'm not going to tell you what they mean yet, Mr. Carter, because I don't know myself, and I promised you and your wife I wouldn't hand you comfort dressed up as conclusions. But I can tell you this much plainly: your daughter did not simply walk away from her life. She spent weeks, possibly months, preparing for the possibility that something would happen to her. She hid evidence. She photographed someone watching her. She left instructions for whoever came looking."

Frank's jaw tightened, and his hands, folded in his lap, closed slowly into fists. "Delgado's still calling it voluntary."

"Detective Delgado is working with less information than I currently have in my jacket pocket," Bentley said, "and considerably less motivation to go looking for more of it. That will change."

"You believe me now. About her being taken."

Bentley considered the question with the same care he gave every question that mattered. "I believe the evidence, Mr. Carter, and right now the evidence tells me your daughter was afraid of something specific enough to prepare for it, and organized enough to leave a trail for someone patient enough to follow it. Whether that fear ends in her being taken, or in her going into hiding

on her own terms to protect herself and whoever her source was, I don't yet know. But I don't believe, any longer, that this is a woman who simply wanted to disappear."

It was not, Bentley knew, the full reassurance a grieving father wanted to hear. But he watched something in Frank Carter's shoulders ease very slightly regardless — the particular relief of a man who has spent two days being told he was imagining danger where none existed, finally hearing someone with the standing to say otherwise agree that his instincts had been right all along.

"He that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly... he shall dwell on high."

— Isaiah 33:15-16



Bentley returned to Larkspur Street as the afternoon light began to fail, carrying the flash drive, the notebook, and the photograph of the symbol in a locked case at his side, and he laid all three on the central table in front of Mason and Victoria with the particular quiet of a man who understood he had just crossed some invisible threshold from investigating a missing person into something considerably larger.

Mason had the photograph of the symbol enlarged on his monitor within minutes, running it through every image database his access allowed him to reach. Victoria studied the notebook's shorthand with the patient, careful attention of a woman accustomed to finding meaning in things other people dismissed as noise.

"It's not a standard cipher," she said after a few minutes. "But it has structure — repeated character clusters, consistent spacing. This is someone who built a system and used it long enough that it became second nature. Give me a few days and a sample of her ordinary handwriting to compare against, and I think I can start breaking it."

"And this?" Bentley nodded toward the symbol on Mason's screen.

"Nothing yet," Mason admitted, "but nothing yet doesn't mean nothing. Corporate logos get quietly changed and buried all the time — trademark filings, old subsidiary branding, stuff that gets scrubbed from public records after a rebrand. If this symbol belonged to something Cross Global once was, or something it still is under a name nobody outside its legal department knows to search for, it'll be in a filing somewhere. I'll find it."

Bentley looked at the three objects on the table — a notebook full of secrets, a flash drive full of encrypted evidence, a photograph of a man watching a woman who had somehow, against every disadvantage, managed to watch him back — and thought of the index card folded behind a picture frame, sealed now in evidence plastic in his jacket pocket.

Trust the verse. Not the man.

He did not share the card with Mason and Victoria yet. Some instinct, one he did not entirely trust and could not entirely explain, told him to hold that particular piece close a little longer, until he understood more clearly which man Emily Carter had been warning whoever found her trail to distrust.

His phone rang as Mason was pulling up a fourth database, and Sarah's name appeared on the screen. He stepped away from the table to take it.

"I got the department's file," she said, without preamble. "What there is of it, anyway. Bentley, it's thin. Thinner than thin. No canvass of the neighbors on Sycamore Street. No request for traffic camera footage from the streets around the newsroom. No follow-up on the anonymous source Emily's story references but doesn't name. A first-year detective could have done more in an afternoon than what's actually in this file."

"Delgado told the Carters he'd flagged it as a missing person."

"He flagged it. Flagging isn't investigating." Sarah's voice carried the particular frustration of someone who had spent years inside a system and still, after everything, expected better of it than it usually delivered. "There's a note in the margin, not even typed up properly, just handwritten — 'per Capt. Reyes, low priority, no additional resources pending review.' No

further explanation. No named reason. Just an instruction to slow down, from someone with the rank to make sure it stuck."

Bentley absorbed that in silence, watching Mason's screen scroll through image results without a match yet in sight, watching Victoria's pen move steadily across a legal pad as she began mapping the notebook's repeated shorthand clusters. "Can you get me the captain's name attached to that note?"

"Already have it. I'll send it over tonight. But Bentley—" Sarah paused, and when she continued her voice had softened into something closer to the concern she rarely let herself show him directly. "Be careful how loudly you go looking into why a captain wanted this case buried. If Cross Global reaches into a company payroll and a mayor's office easily enough to get a story slow-walked, it isn't a stretch to think they reach into a police department too. You go asking the wrong person the wrong question, and the next file that goes quiet could have your name on the tab."

"Understood," Bentley said, for the second time in two days, and found that he meant it exactly as much as he had the first time — which was to say, he heard the warning clearly, and intended to keep working regardless.

"There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known."

— **Matthew 10:26**

Outside, the last of the daylight drained slowly out of the sky over Ashford Falls, and somewhere across the city, in an office forty floors above the street, a man who believed control was the only true form of peace watched the evening settle over a city he had already begun, quietly and patiently, to make his own. He did not yet know a private investigator named Bentley Blackwood existed. That, too, would change — sooner than either of them expected, and in a manner neither of them would have chosen.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ghosts of the Past

"Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted."

— Matthew 5:4

Sarah Whitmore arrived at Blackwood Investigations a little after eight the next morning, carrying a cardboard tray with three coffees and a manila envelope tucked beneath her arm, and Mason looked up from his monitors long enough to announce, to no one in particular, that the day had officially improved.

"Flattery," Sarah said, setting the tray down on the central table, "will get you exactly one of these coffees, and only because I already labeled it with your name."

She was forty-one, brown-haired, green-eyed, built with the compact athleticism of a woman who had spent two decades in a career that occasionally required her to run toward the thing everyone else was running from. She wore her confidence the way some people wore a favorite coat — comfortably, without needing to announce it — and she moved through Bentley's office with the easy familiarity of someone who had spent enough years in rooms like this one that the space no longer required an invitation. Bentley had known her for eleven years, since their second week paired together as a rookie analyst and a mid-career agent at the Bureau's regional field office, and in all that time he had never once known her to walk into a room without already having decided what she intended to accomplish before she left it.

"You said you'd send the captain's name over last night," Bentley said, nodding at the envelope.

"I did. I also decided a phone call wasn't going to cut it once I saw what else was in that file." Sarah pulled out a chair and sat, sliding the envelope across the table toward him. "Captain Alan Reyes. Twenty-two years with Ashford Falls PD, clean record, not the kind of man who

usually needs to be told twice to bury something. Which tells me somebody with real leverage got to him directly, because in my experience, officers with clean twenty-two-year records don't risk them for anything less than something that scares them considerably more than losing their pension."

"The wicked flee when no man pursueth: but the righteous are bold as a lion."

— **Proverbs 28:1**

Bentley opened the envelope and scanned its contents — personnel records, a financial disclosure form that looked, on first pass, unremarkable. "You think he's compromised, or coerced."

"I think there's a difference between those two things that matters less than people assume once you're the one standing in front of the badge," Sarah said. "Either way, he's not going to help you, and he's positioned to make sure nobody else in that department does either. Which is why I'm here." She looked around the office — at Mason's wall of monitors, at Victoria's legal pad covered in careful annotations of Emily's private shorthand — and something in her expression settled into resolve. "I put in for personal leave this morning. Effective immediately, for as long as this takes."

"Sarah—"

"Don't," she said, not unkindly, but with a flatness that closed the subject before Bentley could open it further. "I read Emily Carter's story twice last night, front to back, and I've spent eleven years learning to recognize the shape of a case that's going to get someone hurt if it isn't handled by people who already understand what they're up against. I'm not doing this because you need saving, Bentley. I'm doing it because I've seen what happens when good investigators go up against organizations with this much reach, and I am not going to sit at a desk two hours from here reading about it in a headline."

Bentley held her gaze for a long moment, and something passed between them that did not require words — the particular understanding of two people who had, at different points over

eleven years, each pulled the other back from the edge of something neither of them had wanted to name aloud. He nodded once, and that was the whole of the negotiation.

It was not the first time Sarah Whitmore had made that particular decision on his behalf. Six years earlier, in the raw, disoriented weeks after Rachel's funeral, when Bentley had insisted on personally reviewing every piece of evidence from the accident site despite a supervisor's clear instruction that he recuse himself from anything connected to his wife's death, it had been Sarah who quietly rearranged her own caseload to work alongside him, unofficially, evenings and weekends, so that he was never combing through those files entirely alone. She had never asked his permission. She had simply shown up, the way she had shown up this morning with three coffees and a decision already made, and Bentley had learned, over the years, that arguing with Sarah Whitmore once her mind was settled was a considerably less efficient use of his time than simply accepting the help.

"For the record," Sarah added, sliding a second folder across the table, "Grace Carter called me last night. Got my number from Frank, who apparently decided the department wasn't the only place worth building an alliance. She wanted to know if I was a believer." Sarah's mouth curved, not quite a smile. "I told her I was raised in the church and drifted a long way from it, and she told me that was all right, she'd pray for the both of us regardless, and that her pastor back in Millbrook had already put the whole congregation on it. Man named Elijah Grant. She seems to think he's going to matter to this case eventually."

"Does she say why?"

"No. Just a feeling, she said. But I've learned not to dismiss a mother's feelings about her missing daughter, Bentley, whatever their source. Grace Carter hasn't been wrong about anything yet."

"Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour."

— Ecclesiastes 4:9



Mason's update, when he finally looked up from his monitors, was not the breakthrough Bentley had hoped for but was not nothing either. "The drive's encrypted with something better than I expected out of a freelance journalist — military-grade, multiple layers, the kind of protection you'd see on a corporate legal team's most sensitive files, not a reporter's personal backup. I can crack it. I want to be honest that it's going to take days, not hours, and every attempt risks corrupting the data if I push too hard too fast. I'd rather go slow and get it right."

"Go slow," Bentley said. "We don't get a second copy if you break it."

"The notebook's coming along faster," Victoria said, turning her legal pad around to show a growing table of symbols matched to letters. "It's a substitution cipher layered with a transposition pattern — clever, but not unbreakable, especially once I had a sample of her ordinary handwriting to compare rhythm and habit against. I've got roughly thirty percent of it readable now. Names, mostly, and dates. One name repeats more than any other."

"Cross," Bentley said.

"Cross, yes. But also this." Victoria turned the pad again, tapping a partially decoded line. "A name that isn't in any of the public reporting. Marcus Vane."

Nobody at the table recognized it. Mason typed it into three databases in quick succession and came up with nothing more revealing than a handful of unrelated people who shared the name, none of them connected to Cross Global Technologies in any way a preliminary search could surface.

"Keep decoding," Bentley said. "Whoever Marcus Vane is, Emily thought he mattered enough to write his name in a code she built specifically so no one else could read it. That's worth understanding."

He gathered the security footage Priya had preserved, the department's thin case file Sarah had obtained, and a city map already marked with a red line tracing Emily's known route

from the newsroom to the parking garage on the night she vanished. "Sarah and I are going to walk her last route. I want to see what she saw, in the order she saw it."

"Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts."

— Psalm 139:23



The security footage from the Ashford Herald lobby showed Emily leaving the building at 12:07 a.m., exactly as Curtis the night guard had told the department, exchanging a brief word with him that the camera's audio, degraded by age and cheap equipment, could not clearly capture. She walked north along the sidewalk, hood up against a rain that had only just begun, her satchel slung across her body, her pace unhurried but not leisurely — the walk, Bentley thought, of a woman who wanted to appear calm without actually being calm, a distinction his years at the Bureau had trained him to recognize in the smallest details of gait and posture.

"She knew someone might be watching her leave," Sarah said, standing beside him in front of the small monitor in the Herald's security office, watching the same eleven seconds of footage for the fourth time. "Look at her shoulders. She's not walking like a woman heading home to sleep. She's walking like a woman being careful not to look like she's being careful."

Bentley said nothing, because Sarah was right, and because he had already noticed it himself, and because some part of him was busy noticing something else entirely — the particular angle of the streetlight against the wet pavement, the sheen of rain on dark asphalt, the way the footage's grainy black-and-white rendered the whole scene in shades of gray that looked, uncomfortably, like a hundred other pieces of footage he had reviewed in the eighteen months after Rachel died, searching every camera within five miles of that mountain road for a vehicle, a shadow, anything that would tell him her death had not simply been an accident that swallowed itself whole and left no trace.

*"The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of
a contrite spirit."*

— Psalm 34:18

They followed the four-block route on foot, in the same rain that had fallen the night Emily walked it, though this rain came in the gray hour of mid-morning rather than the black hour of midnight. Bentley walked the sidewalk slowly, matching what he could reconstruct of Emily's pace from the footage, noting the intersections, the alley mouths, the handful of businesses whose exterior cameras might have caught an angle the Herald's own camera had missed.

At the second intersection, a small bakery's security camera — untouched by the department, unreviewed by Delgado's team — had captured eight seconds of footage that the department's incomplete canvass had simply failed to collect. Sarah found it within twenty minutes of asking, flashing a badge she was not, strictly speaking, still authorized to use in an official capacity, though the bakery's owner had not thought to ask too many questions of a woman who carried herself the way Sarah Whitmore carried herself.

The footage showed Emily crossing the street at 12:11 a.m., and, four seconds behind her, close enough to be deliberate and far enough to be plausible as coincidence, a black sedan pulling slowly away from the curb where it had been idling.

Bentley watched it three times before he spoke. "Same make as the vehicle in the photograph she hid in her closet."

"Same," Sarah agreed. "I can't get a plate off this angle. But it's the same car, Bentley. Whoever was watching her from that parked sedan didn't just photograph her once from a distance. They followed her, on foot camera range, close enough to see exactly which direction she turned."

Bentley stood very still on the wet sidewalk, rain gathering on his shoulders, watching eight seconds of grainy footage loop for a fourth time on Sarah's phone screen — a woman

walking alone into darkness, a car pulling away from a curb four seconds behind her, the whole scene rendered in the same flat gray as every mile of mountain road he had once combed for a truth that had never surfaced. He felt something cold settle low in his chest, a sensation he recognized immediately and hated recognizing, because it had nothing to do with the case in front of him and everything to do with a case that had never, in six years, allowed itself to be closed.

"When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee."

— **Isaiah 43:2**



"You're somewhere else," Sarah said, when they had ducked beneath the awning of a closed shop to escape the worst of the rain. "You've had that same look twice in the last twenty minutes."

"I'm fine."

"You're a terrible liar for a man who spent nine years reading other people's tells for a living." Sarah leaned against the shop's brick wall, arms crossed, studying him with the particular patience of someone who had decided not to let him retreat into silence the way he usually did. "It's the wet road, isn't it. The rain. The idea of somebody disappearing on a night that looked exactly like this one."

Bentley did not answer immediately, and in the silence, Sarah did something she rarely did — she simply waited, without filling the space, without offering the easy comfort of a question that let him deflect. It was, he thought, one of the reasons he trusted her more than almost anyone else still living. She had learned, over eleven years, exactly when pressing him would break something and when silence would let it surface on its own.

"Rachel was driving home from an interview," he said finally, quietly, the words coming out with the particular reluctance of things kept locked away for a long time. "Nine-forty at night, on a road she'd driven a hundred times, in weather that wasn't even especially bad by that road's usual standards. No skid marks. No second vehicle. Just a car off the road and a woman who'd spent eleven years being careful, being smart, being exactly the kind of person who doesn't lose control of a car she knows better than her own house." He looked out at the rain falling steadily onto the empty street, watching it collect in the gutters exactly as it must have collected on a mountain road two hundred miles from here, six years and a lifetime ago. "I told myself for six years that the accident report was simply incomplete. That I hadn't found the seam because I hadn't looked hard enough, not because there wasn't one to find. And now I'm standing on a street corner watching a stranger's daughter get followed by a black sedan on a night with the exact same rain, and I can't stop asking myself whether I gave up on Rachel's case a year too early, or whether some part of me has spent six years refusing to accept that some evidence simply never surfaces, no matter how patient or how skilled the person looking for it happens to be."

Sarah did not offer him easy comfort, because she was not a woman who dealt in easy comfort, and because she understood, better than most, that Bentley Blackwood had spent his whole adult life distrusting anything that arrived too smoothly. She had sat with him in worse silences than this one — the hospital corridor the night they'd identified Rachel's body, the graveside service where Bentley had stood so rigidly still that Sarah had genuinely worried, for a moment, that he might not be breathing at all. She had learned, across all of it, that the version of comfort Bentley could actually accept was never the soft kind. What she offered instead was simpler, and truer.

"I worked that case with you for eight months, Bentley. I know exactly how hard you looked. If there had been a seam to find, you would have found it — you're the best I've ever worked with, and I include myself generously in that comparison." She let that settle before she continued. "But I also think you've spent six years treating the absence of evidence as proof there

was nothing to discover, instead of what it actually might be — proof that whoever did this, if anyone did this, was better at hiding it than the people you usually go up against."

"For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known."

— **1 Corinthians 13:12**

Bentley turned that over in silence for a long moment, rain drumming steadily against the awning above them, and felt, not for the first time in the last three days, the strange sensation of an old wound being handled by someone careful enough not to reopen it carelessly. "You think Rachel's death and this case are connected."

"I think," Sarah said carefully, "that a black sedan following a journalist on a rainy night, and a mountain road accident that left no trace whatsoever, both describe the work of someone patient, resourced, and extremely careful not to leave evidence behind. I'm not telling you they're the same someone, Bentley. I don't have proof of that, and neither do you, and I know exactly how dangerous it is for a man like you to go looking for a connection you want to find rather than one the evidence actually supports." She held his gaze steadily. "But I'm also not going to pretend I don't notice the shape of it. And I don't think you should pretend not to notice it either. Grief that gets buried instead of examined doesn't go away, Bentley. It just waits for the next rainy night to remind you it's still there."

"Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."

— **Psalms 30:5**



They reached the parking garage where Emily's car had sat undisturbed for two days, and Bentley walked the structure's interior with the same methodical patience he had applied to her apartment — checking sightlines, camera coverage, the placement of every support column a

person might use for cover while watching a vehicle without being seen from the street. The garage's own cameras, he already knew from the department's file, had recorded nothing unusual, though "nothing unusual" and "nothing there" were rarely, in Bentley's experience, the same claim.

It was Sarah who found the detail Delgado's team had missed — a maintenance door on the garage's second level, propped that night, according to the building's automated log, for eleven minutes beginning at 12:14 a.m., three minutes after Emily's last known text message to her mother, and never flagged as unusual because building maintenance staff propped that same door for deliveries several times a week.

"Eleven minutes is a long time to prop a fire door for nothing," Sarah said, examining the door's keypad, its worn buttons and the small green light indicating a code entry rather than a forced or malfunctioning latch. "This wasn't kicked open. Someone with a valid code opened it. Which means either building staff, or someone who obtained a valid code some other way."

Bentley crouched beside the doorframe, examining the concrete floor just inside the threshold, and found, in the grout between two floor tiles, a single dark thread caught and pulled loose — wool, dark blue, the kind of fiber that might come from a winter coat, or a scarf, snagged on a rough edge of metal flashing at the door's base.

He photographed it, bagged it carefully, and stood in the quiet garage for a long moment, listening to the distant hum of traffic outside and the steady drip of rainwater somewhere in the structure's shadows.

"She came through this door," he said. "Or someone carrying something that came through this door did."

Sarah was already on the phone with the garage's management company, and it took her less than ten minutes standing in the damp stairwell to extract the information Delgado's team had apparently never thought to request: the maintenance door's electronic lock was serviced under contract, and the contract belonged not to the garage's owner but to a third-party security firm called Meridian Systems Group, which handled access control for eleven properties across

Ashford Falls, including, Sarah discovered with a single follow-up call to the state business registry, three buildings owned outright by subsidiaries of Cross Global Technologies.

"Meridian doesn't just service this garage," she said, lowering the phone. "They installed and maintain the access system for it. Whoever had a valid code for that door either worked for Meridian, or got a code from someone who did."

Bentley looked back at the propped door, the small green light on its keypad, the single blue thread caught in the grout at his feet, and felt the shape of the investigation shift very slightly beneath him — not a leap, not yet, but the first small, deliberate step of a chain he suspected would eventually run all the way back to a glass tower forty floors above the city. "Get me everything on Meridian Systems Group," he said. "Ownership, contracts, who signs their invoices."

"Already asked Mason to start pulling it the moment I hung up," Sarah said. "Some habits don't leave a person just because they turn in their badge for a while."

"For nothing is secret, that shall not be made manifest; neither any thing hid, that shall not be known and come abroad."

— Luke 8:17



They drove back to Larkspur Street in near silence, the rain finally beginning to ease, and Bentley found his mind returning, against his own discipline, to the eight seconds of grainy footage from the bakery camera — a black sedan pulling away from a curb, four seconds behind a woman walking alone into the dark. He thought of the mountain road. He thought of an accident report that had told him everything and explained nothing. He thought of Grace Carter's steady, unshakeable voice across his desk three days ago. I don't need you to have faith. I have enough for both of us. I just need you to look.

"I'm going to reopen Rachel's file," he said quietly, as Sarah pulled into the lot behind the agency. It was not a question, and he had not planned to say it aloud, but once the words were spoken he found he did not regret them.

"I know," Sarah said. "I've known since the moment you went quiet on that street corner. I'll help you, whenever you're ready — properly this time, with everything we've both learned in the years since, instead of the raw grief we were both trying to work through the first time. But I want you to hear me say this plainly, Bentley, because I don't think anyone else in your life will say it plainly enough: whatever you find, if you find anything at all, it isn't going to give you back the years you've spent believing you failed her. It can only give you the truth. You're going to have to decide, eventually, whether the truth alone is enough, or whether you need something more than the truth to finally let yourself grieve her properly."

Bentley did not answer that immediately. He sat in the passenger seat of Sarah's car, rain sliding slower now down the windshield, and thought of two Bibles in Emily Carter's life worn thin at the exact same verse, and of Rachel's own two Bibles, one for the car and one for the nightstand, and of a truth he had spent six years insisting he trusted only when it could be proven, measured, and held in his own two hands.

"Maybe," he said finally, "it's time I find out."

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

— **John 8:32**



That night, after Sarah had gone home to gather enough clothes and case notes to see her through what both of them understood, without saying so directly, would not be a short investigation, and after Mason and Victoria had finally powered down their monitors somewhere past ten o'clock, Bentley remained alone in the quiet office on Larkspur Street and did something he had not done in eleven months.

He unlocked the bottom drawer of his desk — the one drawer in the entire agency that had no case number, no color-coded label, nothing to mark it as belonging to any investigation he had ever billed a client for — and drew out a thick folder, its edges soft from handling, its tab labeled in handwriting that had grown steadier over the years even as the ache behind it never had.

R. BLACKWOOD — INCIDENT REPORT.

He did not open it right away. He sat with it closed in front of him for a long time, the office silent except for the faint hum of the building settling around him, the pocket watch heavy in his jacket where he had carried it all day without once opening it. He thought of Sarah's words in the rain. Grief that gets buried instead of examined doesn't go away. He thought of Grace Carter's face across this same desk three days ago, steady even through her fear. He thought of two Bibles worn thin at the same verse, one belonging to a missing woman he had never met, and one that had belonged, he now allowed himself to remember fully for the first time in longer than he could easily admit, to his wife.

"All right," he said quietly, to the empty room, to the folder, to whatever or whoever might have been listening. "Let's see what I missed."

He opened the file.

"The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? the LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"

— Psalm 27:1

CHAPTER FIVE

Cross Global Technologies

"Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves."

— Matthew 7:15

By the time Bentley sat down the next morning to study Cross Global Technologies properly, rather than in the fragments and margins he had allowed himself over the previous three days, he had already formed an early hypothesis about the company, and the hypothesis troubled him more than any piece of physical evidence he had gathered so far. It was this: everything about Cross Global Technologies was, on its surface, exactly what it claimed to be, and Bentley had spent nine years at the Bureau learning that the most dangerous people he had ever investigated were rarely the ones who looked dangerous. They were the ones who looked, on every available surface, entirely safe.

He spread the material across the central table — annual reports, a decade of press coverage, transcripts of Damian Cross's two congressional appearances, a glossy corporate magazine profile from eighteen months earlier that Mason had pulled and printed the moment Bentley asked for it. The picture that emerged was, by any conventional measure, admirable. Cross Global had been founded fourteen years earlier in a two-room office above a hardware store, funded by nothing more than Damian Cross's own savings and a small loan from his mother. It now employed eleven thousand people across six countries, held patents in facial recognition, predictive analytics, and what its marketing materials called "ambient safety infrastructure" — a phrase Bentley read four times before he understood it was corporate language for cameras that never stopped watching.

The company gave, by its own public accounting, over two hundred million dollars a year to charitable causes. It had built three hospital wings, funded a dozen scholarship programs, and sponsored a rebuilding effort in a neighborhood devastated by flooding two years earlier, an effort that had earned Damian Cross a personal commendation from the governor and a cover story in a national business magazine titled THE CONSCIENCE OF SILICON.

"For Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light."

— 2 Corinthians 11:14

"It's too clean," Victoria said, when she arrived and found Bentley still surrounded by printouts. She picked up the magazine cover, studying Damian Cross's photograph — a lean, silver-templed man in his early fifties, dressed in an understated gray suit, smiling the particular smile of a man who had learned exactly how much warmth to show a camera to be believed without being disbelieved. "I've profiled cult leaders with less carefully constructed public presentation than this. Every quote is measured. Every donation is timed to a news cycle that needed good news. Every charitable act happens to be the kind that photographs well and generates gratitude rather than scrutiny."

"You think it's calculated."

"I think a man who genuinely wanted to do good in the world would occasionally do something inconvenient, something that didn't serve his image, simply because it was right." Victoria set the magazine down. "I have not found one example of Damian Cross doing anything inconvenient in fourteen years of public record. That doesn't prove malice, Bentley. But it's the kind of pattern that makes me want to look considerably harder at what isn't public record."

She pulled a chair around and sat across from him, the way she did when a case had moved from evidence into something closer to her actual specialty. "I want to tell you what worries me most, and it isn't the money or the charity work. It's this." She tapped the transcript of Cross's second congressional appearance, open to a passage she had underlined twice. "A senator asked him directly whether Cross Global's ambient safety infrastructure could, in principle, be

used to track private citizens who had committed no crime. Most executives dodge that question. Cross didn't dodge it. He answered it head-on, and I've read the answer eleven times now."

She read it aloud, her voice flat and careful, the practiced neutrality of a woman who had spent a career quoting dangerous men without letting her own feelings color the words. "Senator, I'd ask you to consider a harder question first. What is freedom worth to a family whose child never came home? I didn't build this company to watch the innocent. I built it because someone has to watch the guilty before they act, not after, and if that requires watching everyone in order to find the few who mean harm, I consider that a small price for the alternative.' The room applauded, Bentley. Sitting senators applauded a man who had just told them, in plain language, that he considers universal surveillance an acceptable cost of safety, and not one of them seemed to hear what he'd actually said."

"You think he believes it."

"I think that's what frightens me most of all," Victoria said quietly. "A liar can be caught in his lies eventually. A man who has convinced himself that controlling everyone is an act of love doesn't need to lie. He just needs enough people willing to applaud."

*"There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways
of death."*

— **Proverbs 14:12**

Mason, who had been quiet at his desk for the better part of an hour, spoke without turning around. "I might have something for that."

*"Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and
light for darkness."*

— **Isaiah 5:20**



What Mason had was, by his own admission, still incomplete — a financial trail that had taken him most of the night to reconstruct, threading through three shell entities before it surfaced anywhere near a name that meant something. Meridian Systems Group, the security firm that maintained the access control system for the parking garage where Emily's car had sat abandoned, was itself wholly owned by a holding company called Ashford Falls Municipal Solutions LLC, which was, in turn, majority-owned by a private equity vehicle that Cross Global Technologies had quietly established four years earlier for the specific purpose, according to its founding documents, of "acquiring critical infrastructure assets in emerging smart-city markets."

"In English," Mason said, "Cross Global bought the company that controls the locks on half the buildings in this city, and they did it through enough layers that nobody doing a casual background check would ever connect the two. That's not an accident. That's architecture."

He turned his monitor around to display a scanned financial authorization form, the kind of internal document companies generated for large transfers between subsidiaries, dense with routing numbers and approval codes that meant nothing to Bentley at a glance. But at the bottom of the form, beside a line reading FINAL AUTHORIZATION, was a signature — small, precise, unmistakably deliberate even in digital reproduction — and beside it, a six-character alphanumeric code that Mason had circled in red.

"That's Damian Cross's personal authorization signature," Mason said. "I cross-referenced it against two other filings that are public record, SEC disclosures where his signature's a matter of law rather than something buried in a shell company's back-office paperwork. Same signature. Same authorization code format, embedded the same way each time — it's not a coincidence, it's a habit, the kind of thing an executive develops and keeps because changing it would be more disruptive than the risk of somebody eventually noticing."

Bentley studied the document for a long moment, feeling something settle into place with the particular quiet satisfaction of a piece of evidence that did exactly what evidence was supposed to do — not prove everything, but prove enough to justify looking further. "This is the

first thing we have that puts Damian Cross's own hand on anything connected to Emily's disappearance."

"It's not proof he ordered anything done to her," Victoria cautioned. "It's proof he personally authorized the acquisition of a company that controls access to a garage where she was last seen. That's a connection, not a confession."

"It's enough of a connection," Bentley said, "to open a file." He pulled a fresh sheet of paper toward himself and, in the same even, deliberate handwriting he had used to label the Carter case two days earlier, wrote a new heading at the top.

THE CROSS INVESTIGATION.

Beneath it, he wrote a single line: Financial record — Damian Cross signature authorization code — Meridian Systems Group acquisition — connects to Sycamore St. garage access.

He did not know it yet, and would not know it for years, but this single sheet of paper — folded now into a growing folder he would keep separate from every other case file in the agency — was the first page of an investigation that would eventually consume two decades of his life.

*"He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh
them shall have mercy."*

— **Proverbs 28:13**



"I want to see the building," Bentley said, once the document had been photographed, logged, and secured. "Not the filings. The place itself. I want to stand in the lobby of Cross Tower and watch how the people who work there behave when they think no one important is watching them."

Sarah looked up from her own review of the department's thin case file. "They'll have security that flags unregistered visitors within about ninety seconds, Bentley. You walk in there

under your own name, and Damian Cross will know a private investigator connected to the Carter family toured his lobby before you've even made it back to the car."

"I'm counting on it," Bentley said. "Not because I want him to know, but because I want to see what changes once he does. A company with nothing to hide doesn't need to react quickly to a private investigator's visit. A company that reacts quickly is telling me something, whether it means to or not."

Sarah studied him for a moment, then reached for her coat. "That's either very smart or very reckless. With you it's usually both at once."

They arrived at Cross Tower a little after two that afternoon — a fifty-two-story monument of glass and brushed steel rising out of the center of downtown Ashford Falls, its lobby a soaring atrium of white stone and living greenery, a waterfall wall running silently down one side of the space, the kind of architecture designed to make visitors feel simultaneously impressed and small. Bentley had seen a great many corporate lobbies in his career, built to project confidence and stability. Cross Tower's lobby was built to project something closer to inevitability — the sense that whatever this company was building, its arrival in a visitor's life was not a possibility but a certainty already in motion.

"Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall."

— **Proverbs 16:18**

What struck him first was the silence. Not the absence of sound — the lobby hummed with the ordinary business of a working headquarters, footsteps on polished stone, the murmur of a dozen quiet conversations, the soft electronic chime of badge readers at the security gates — but the absence of anything unguarded. Bentley had spent nine years learning to read the small, unconscious behaviors people displayed when they believed themselves unobserved: the loosened shoulders on a coffee break, the private joke shared between colleagues, the brief, human slackening that happened in almost every workplace the moment formal attention turned elsewhere. He watched Cross Global's employees move through their own lobby for nearly ten

minutes, and he did not see it once. Every posture remained composed. Every conversation stayed low and contained. Even the two security guards at the front gate, engaged in what should have been idle small talk, kept their eyes moving across the room in a rhythm too practiced to be casual.

"They're not just polite," Sarah murmured beside him, matching his observation without needing it explained. "They're careful. Everywhere. All the time."

"People who are careful all the time," Bentley said quietly, "are usually careful because someone taught them what happens when they aren't."

A young woman in a Cross Global badge lanyard brushed past them near the waterfall wall, balancing a tray of coffee cups, and for the briefest moment, when she thought herself out of anyone's direct line of sight, Bentley watched her shoulders drop half an inch and her eyes close for a single, weary breath before she caught herself, straightened, and resumed the careful, composed posture of everyone else moving through the lobby. It lasted perhaps two seconds. Bentley had built a career on noticing things that lasted two seconds.

He fell into step near her, not obviously enough to alarm her, close enough to speak without being overheard by the security desk. "Long day?"

The young woman glanced at him, wary, the practiced wariness of someone who had learned not to speak carelessly to strangers in her own building. "Every day's about the same here," she said, which Bentley recognized immediately as a rehearsed non-answer, the corporate equivalent of a closed door.

"I imagine it's a good place to work," he said, keeping his tone light, unthreatening. "Excellent benefits, I'd guess, for a company this size."

"The benefits are excellent," she agreed, and something in the flat, exact way she said it told Bentley more than the words themselves — a phrase delivered like a line from an employee handbook rather than a genuine opinion. She glanced once, involuntarily, toward a small black dome mounted discreetly in the ceiling above the waterfall wall, and then away again, quickly, as

though she had caught herself doing something she'd been trained not to do. "I need to get this upstairs before it's cold," she said, and moved on before Bentley could ask anything further.

He did not follow her. But he noted, with the same disciplined patience he applied to every small and involuntary human gesture, the exact location of the ceiling dome she had glanced toward, and filed it alongside everything else he had learned in this lobby that no brochure would ever confirm.

"For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind."

— 2 Timothy 1:7



They did not make it past the visitor's desk before a man in a charcoal suit approached them, moving with the unhurried, deliberate pace of someone who had been alerted to their presence well before they reached the front of the line. He was tall, broad through the shoulders, somewhere in his early forties, his dark hair cropped close and his expression arranged into a professional warmth that did not, Bentley noted immediately, extend anywhere near his eyes.

"Mr. Blackwood," the man said, extending a hand. "Marcus Vane, Director of Corporate Security. I understand you're looking into the unfortunate matter of Ms. Carter's disappearance."

Bentley did not react to the name, though inwardly something cold and certain clicked into place — the same name, decoded from Emily Carter's private shorthand two nights earlier, written and underlined with an urgency that suggested she had understood, long before anyone else did, exactly what this man represented. He shook the offered hand and found the grip firm, controlled, entirely unremarkable, which was itself, Bentley thought, a kind of tell. Dangerous men rarely announced themselves through a handshake.

"News travels fast inside this building," Bentley said.

"We take the safety and reputation of everyone connected to Cross Global seriously, Mr. Blackwood. When a former employee's story generates this much public attention, and a private investigator visits our lobby the same week, it would be negligent of us not to notice the connection quickly." Vane's smile did not waver. "For the record, Ms. Carter was never a Cross Global employee. Her reporting characterized our relationship inaccurately in several respects, which our legal team has already addressed publicly. We are, of course, deeply concerned for her welfare, as we would be for anyone's."

"Ye shall know them by their fruits."

— **Matthew 7:16**

"I haven't asked you anything yet," Bentley said mildly, "and you've already answered three questions I didn't put to you. That's either very efficient, or you've rehearsed this conversation more than once today."

Something flickered behind Vane's professional composure — brief, controlled, gone almost before Bentley registered it, but there nonetheless, the particular tightness of a man unaccustomed to being read so plainly in his own lobby. "I simply anticipate the questions people usually have, Mr. Blackwood. It saves everyone time."

"Then let me ask one you might not have anticipated," Bentley said, holding the man's gaze with the same patient, unhurried stillness he had used to unravel a hundred interrogation rooms. "Meridian Systems Group services the security access at the Sycamore Street parking garage where Ms. Carter's vehicle was found abandoned. Meridian is owned, through several convenient layers, by a private equity entity your employer personally authorized four years ago. Can you tell me why a smart-city infrastructure acquisition four years ago happens to control the exact door a missing journalist's trail runs cold behind?"

The silence that followed lasted perhaps two full seconds, which was, in Bentley's professional experience, an eternity for a man practiced enough to have controlled every other second of the conversation before it.

"I'll have to look into that," Vane said finally, and his voice had lost, for just a moment, its rehearsed warmth entirely. "Cross Global owns a great many infrastructure assets across this city, Mr. Blackwood. I wasn't aware of that particular connection, and I'd be careful drawing conclusions from ownership structures that predate most of our current security staff."

"I'm not drawing conclusions yet," Bentley said. "I'm asking questions. There's a difference, though I notice you seem more comfortable when other people skip that distinction."

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?"

— **Jeremiah 17:9**



Vane recovered his composure with practiced speed, offering a tight, professional close to the conversation, a promise to have Cross Global's legal counsel follow up formally if Bentley had further questions, and an escort — polite but unmistakably firm — toward the lobby's exit. Bentley let himself be walked out without resistance, because he had already gotten what he came for, and pressing further would have cost more than it gained.

Outside, standing on the wide granite steps of Cross Tower with the afternoon sun breaking briefly through the clouds, Sarah exhaled slowly.

"Marcus Vane," she said. "The name from Emily's notebook."

"The name from Emily's notebook," Bentley agreed, "sitting in a fifty-two-story building with a title that lets him move freely through every security system this company owns, including, I'd guess, whichever one controlled the garage door on Sycamore Street the night she disappeared."

"He knew exactly who you were before you said a word. He had a rehearsed answer ready before you asked the question. That's not a man reacting to an unexpected visitor, Bentley.

That's a man who's been preparing for this exact conversation since before Emily's story even published."

Bentley looked back up at the tower, its glass face reflecting the moving clouds in long, distorted sheets, and thought of Victoria's assessment from that morning — a man who genuinely wanted to do good would occasionally do something inconvenient — and of the flawless, careful composure of every employee he had watched move through that lobby, none of them slackening for even a moment, all of them, he now understood, trained by an institution that punished the smallest unguarded gesture.

"Whatever's happening inside that building," he said quietly, "the people in it are more afraid of something than they are of us. I'd very much like to know what."

He told Sarah about the young woman with the coffee tray, the involuntary glance toward the ceiling dome, the rehearsed flatness of her answers. Sarah listened without interrupting, then shook her head slowly.

"Employee surveillance isn't illegal, Bentley. Companies monitor productivity, security, all of it, all the time. That alone doesn't prove anything sinister."

"No," Bentley agreed. "But it tells me what kind of company builds a culture where a twenty-something coffee runner has already learned to censor her own body language in her own break room. That's not a security policy, Sarah. That's a climate. And climates like that don't happen by accident. Someone builds them, deliberately, over years, because they serve a purpose beyond productivity."

"What purpose?"

Bentley looked back once more at the glass tower behind them, its reflective face throwing back a warped, silver version of the city it stood in. "Control," he said. "Practiced, comprehensive, and thoroughly rehearsed. I don't think that building's culture exists to protect trade secrets, Sarah. I think it exists to train every single person inside it to behave, at all times, as though they're already being watched — because they are, and because the company wants them to know it without ever having to say so out loud."

"For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world."

— **Ephesians 6:12**



They drove back to Larkspur Street as the afternoon light began its slow autumn fade, and Bentley found himself turning Vane's brief, involuntary flicker of surprise over in his mind the way he turned over any piece of evidence that had cost him more to obtain than its size suggested. A man that practiced did not simply forget an acquisition his own employer had personally authorized. He had either genuinely not known — which meant Cross Global's compartmentalization ran deeper than even its own security director understood — or he had known perfectly well and had simply failed, for one unguarded second, to keep the mask in place.

Bentley did not yet know which possibility troubled him more.

Back at the office, he added a second line beneath the first entry in the growing Cross Investigation folder: Marcus Vane, Director of Corporate Security — name matches Emily's private notebook — reacted to Meridian ownership question — first person of interest.

He sat with the folder open in front of him for a long moment after writing it, the office quiet around him, Mason's monitors casting their low blue glow across the far wall, Victoria's careful annotations of Emily's shorthand spread across the central table like the beginnings of a map to somewhere none of them had fully charted yet. He thought of Grace Carter's steady voice across this same desk four days earlier. I don't need you to have faith. I have enough for both of us. He thought of a company built to look, in every available direction, like the answer to the world's problems, hiding — he was now more certain than he had been that morning — something considerably darker beneath its flawless surface.

"Everything covered gets revealed eventually," he said quietly, to no one, echoing without quite meaning to the verse that had followed this case since its very first hour. "Let's see how patient I have to be."

"There is nothing hid, which shall not be manifested; neither was any thing kept secret, but that it should come abroad."

— Mark 4:22

CHAPTER SIX

The Silent Witness

"Fear thou not, for I am with thee: be not dismayed, for I am thy God."

— Isaiah 41:10

The maintenance log Sarah pried loose from the garage's management company listed six employees with active access codes for the night Emily Carter vanished, and five of them accounted for themselves within a day's work — home with families, on shift elsewhere, one of them out of state entirely on a fishing trip he could prove with gas station receipts and a fish he had apparently photographed at length. The sixth name sat alone at the bottom of the list, a man named Raymond Calloway, forty-six years old, employed by the garage for eleven years, and — according to the log — the only person who had badged into the building's maintenance level at 12:09 a.m., five minutes before Emily's own text message to her mother, and had not badged back out until nearly one in the morning.

"Nobody interviewed him," Sarah said, reading from the department's file with the particular flatness she used when a piece of negligence made her too angry to raise her voice about it properly. "Delgado's team never even flagged the maintenance level as relevant. As far as the official file is concerned, Raymond Calloway doesn't exist."

Mason had the man's basic background pulled up within minutes — eleven years with the garage's management company, no criminal record beyond a decade-old traffic citation, a divorce four years back that had left him raising a daughter alone, a modest apartment payment that never once went late. "Nothing here says frightened," Mason observed, scrolling through the thin file. "Guy's about as ordinary as they come. Which either means he's got nothing to hide, or he's exactly the kind of person who'd have the most to lose by talking."

"Ordinary people are usually the ones who see the most and say the least," Bentley said, gathering his coat. "They don't have lawyers on retainer or reputations to protect. They just have a job they need, and a family depending on them keeping it."

Victoria looked up from her own notes. "If he did see something, and if Vane's already gotten to him once, you should assume he's been told exactly what happens to people who talk. Be careful how you open that conversation, Bentley. A frightened witness can shut down permanently if he feels cornered instead of protected."

"For nothing is secret, that shall not be made manifest."

— Luke 8:17



Calloway lived in a small rented house on the edge of Ashford Falls' industrial district, the kind of neighborhood where porch lights burned through the night less out of hospitality than habit, and where a black sedan idling too long at the curb would draw exactly the sort of attention that made people pull their curtains closed rather than call the police. Bentley and Sarah arrived a little before seven in the evening, and it took three knocks and a long, listening silence before the door finally opened on a chain.

The man who peered through the gap was thin, unshaven, his eyes moving past Bentley's shoulder to the street beyond before they ever settled on Bentley's face. "I don't want any trouble," he said, before either of them had spoken a word.

"We're not here to cause any, Mr. Calloway," Bentley said, keeping his voice low, unhurried, the same register he had used a hundred times with witnesses too frightened to trust their own memory of what they'd seen. "My name is Bentley Blackwood. I'm a private investigator working for Emily Carter's family. This is Sarah Whitmore. We only want a few minutes of your time."

"I already talked to the police."

"No," Sarah said gently, "you didn't. That's the problem. Nobody from the department ever came to ask you anything at all, Mr. Calloway, which means whatever you saw that night has been sitting inside you for four days with nowhere to go."

Something in Calloway's face shifted at that — not relief, not yet, but the particular flicker of a man who had been braced for an accusation and had received, instead, an acknowledgment of exactly the burden he was carrying. The chain slid back.

*"The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the LORD shall
be safe."*

— **Proverbs 29:25**

His living room was small, cluttered in the ordinary way of a man living alone, a single lamp burning against the gathering dusk outside. He did not sit. He stood near the window, angled so he could watch the street without appearing to, and Bentley recognized the posture immediately — the same trained wariness he had seen in Cross Tower's lobby two days earlier, though on Calloway it looked less like corporate discipline and more like the raw, animal vigilance of a man who genuinely believed someone might be coming for him.

"Somebody came to see me the day after," Calloway said finally, his voice low, glancing once toward the window. "Nice suit. Real polite. Said his company appreciated my discretion, and that Meridian valued employees who understood the difference between what they saw and what they needed to say out loud. Didn't threaten me, not exactly. Just made sure I understood

there'd be consequences for my job, my pension, maybe worse, if I said the wrong thing to the wrong person."

"Was his name Marcus Vane?" Bentley asked.

Calloway's face went pale in the lamplight. "How do you know that?"

"Because he's made the same kind of visit before," Bentley said, "and because I've already met him myself." He kept his voice steady, unhurried, giving the man room to arrive at his own decision rather than pushing him toward it. "Mr. Calloway, I understand you're afraid, and I understand exactly why. But a young woman is missing, and her parents haven't slept properly in four days, and I believe you saw something on that maintenance level that could help me find her. I can't promise you nothing bad will happen if you tell me. I can only promise you that nothing good happens if you don't."

*"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."*

— Joshua 1:9



Calloway was quiet for a long moment, his eyes moving between Bentley and Sarah and the darkening window, and when he finally spoke, his voice had dropped almost to a whisper, as though some part of him still believed the walls of his own house might be listening.

"I was checking a breaker panel on the second level, little after midnight," he said. "Heard footsteps first — fast, uneven, like somebody running but trying not to. Then I heard her. A woman, saying 'let go of me,' not screaming, more like she was trying to keep her voice down too, like she didn't want to draw attention any more than whoever had hold of her did. I looked around the corner of the stairwell, just for a second, because I wasn't about to walk straight into whatever that was."

"What did you see," Bentley asked quietly.

"Two men. Big ones, dark clothes, no faces I could swear to in a lineup — it was dark, and I wasn't exactly taking notes. They had her between them, one hand over her mouth, walking her fast toward the maintenance door at the far end of the level, the one that opens onto the side alley. She was fighting them the whole way, twisting, trying to get a hand free. I saw a black SUV waiting in the alley, engine already running, back door open like somebody'd planned it that way." Calloway's hands, Bentley noticed, had begun to shake, and he pressed them flat against his own thighs as though trying to still them by force. "They put her in the back. One of the men got in with her. The other one shut the door, looked back once toward the stairwell — I don't know if he saw me, I ducked back fast — and then they were gone. Whole thing took maybe forty seconds."

"Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid."

— **Isaiah 12:2**

"Did you get any part of the plate?"

"Three letters. G-R-K. That's all I caught before they turned out of the alley." Calloway looked up, and for the first time since he'd opened the door, his eyes held something steadier than fear. "I should have called the police right then. I told myself I would, once my hands stopped shaking. But by the time they stopped, that man from Meridian was already standing on my porch, like he knew exactly what I'd seen before I'd told a living soul." He shook his head slowly. "I've got a daughter, Mr. Blackwood. Eight years old. Her mother's gone, it's just the two of us. I made a choice that night, and I've hated myself for it every day since, but I made it because I couldn't figure out how being brave was going to help her if I wasn't around to raise her."

Sarah, who had been quiet through most of the conversation, spoke gently. "Nobody in this room is going to tell you that fear was foolish, Mr. Calloway. You made the choice you thought would keep your daughter safe. But I want you to hear this clearly: the safest thing for both of you now isn't silence anymore. It's the truth, told to people who can actually protect you."

"When I am afraid, I will trust in thee."

— Psalm 56:3



Bentley was drafting the plate fragment into his notebook, already turning over which databases Mason could search for SUVs registered to Cross-affiliated entities beginning with those three letters, when Calloway went suddenly and completely still, his eyes fixed on the front window.

"There's a car," he said, very quietly. "Across the street. Wasn't there when you came in."

Bentley moved before he had fully processed the warning, crossing to the window in three long strides, angling himself at the edge of the frame the way he had been trained to a decade earlier in rooms far more hostile than this one. A dark SUV sat idling across the street, no headlights, its engine's low growl barely audible through the glass. As Bentley watched, its passenger door opened.

"Sarah, get him back," Bentley said, already moving toward the front door. "Away from the windows, into the kitchen, now."

What happened next unfolded in the compressed, adrenaline-slowed seconds that Bentley had experienced perhaps a dozen times in his career and had never once gotten used to. A man in dark clothing crossed the street at a controlled jog, something metallic and deliberate in his right hand, moving not toward the front door but toward the side of the house, toward the kitchen window that looked out onto Calloway's small backyard — the exact direction Sarah was, at that moment, herding a frightened man for safety.

Bentley shouted a warning even as he wrenched the front door open, and the next several seconds fractured into pieces he would only be able to fully reassemble later: the sound of breaking glass from the kitchen, Sarah's voice sharp and commanding, the flat crack of a single gunshot that punched through the kitchen window frame and buried itself in the drywall eighteen

inches from where Raymond Calloway had been standing four seconds earlier, before Sarah's shoulder had driven into him and taken them both hard to the linoleum floor.

"The LORD shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul."

— Psalm 121:7



Bentley reached the kitchen in under four seconds, weapon drawn, to find the window shattered, the night beyond it empty, the distant, receding sound of the SUV's engine already fading two streets over. Sarah was on the floor beside Calloway, covering him with her own body, her sidearm trained on the broken window, breathing hard but steady.

"He's hit," she said, and Bentley saw it then — a dark stain spreading across Calloway's shoulder, not the center-mass shot that had clearly been intended, but a graze deep enough to matter, torn open by either the bullet itself or a shard of the shattering window.

"Pressure, now," Bentley said, already moving, pulling a dish towel from the counter and pressing it into Sarah's free hand while he called for an ambulance with the flat, clipped precision of a man who had made this exact call more times than he ever wanted to count. Calloway was conscious, pale, his breath coming in short, frightened gasps, one hand gripping Sarah's wrist with a desperation that had nothing to do with the wound and everything to do with the sudden, undeniable proof that his fear had never been paranoia at all.

"They knew," Calloway said, over and over, through gritted teeth, "they knew I talked, they knew already—"

"They didn't know," Bentley said firmly, kneeling beside him, holding his gaze with the same steady, unhurried authority he had used to calm a hundred panicking witnesses before this one. "They were watching this house before we ever arrived, Mr. Calloway. This wasn't punishment for talking to us. This was them making sure you never got the chance." He pressed the towel harder against the wound, feeling the man's pulse hammering fast and thin beneath his

fingers. "You're going to live. Your daughter is going to have her father tonight. Hold onto that, and nothing else, until the paramedics get here."

"The righteous cry, and the LORD heareth, and delivereth them out of all their troubles."

— Psalm 34:17



The ambulance arrived nine minutes later, longer than Bentley would have liked but faster than he had feared, and Calloway was stabilized on scene and transported to Ashford Falls General with a wound the paramedics assessed, cautiously, as unlikely to be life-threatening so long as infection didn't complicate the days ahead. Sarah rode with him. Bentley stayed behind long enough to walk the small backyard with a flashlight, searching for anything the shooter might have left in his haste — a shell casing, a footprint in the soft mulch beneath the kitchen window, a single dark thread caught on the splintered frame that made Bentley's jaw tighten with the particular recognition of a pattern repeating itself.

He photographed everything. He called it in to a detective he trusted from a neighboring precinct rather than to Ashford Falls PD directly, a decision he made without needing to explain it to himself twice.

He also called Frank Carter, standing alone in Calloway's small, wrecked kitchen with glass still glittering across the linoleum, because he had promised the man honesty over comfort, and honesty tonight was going to be difficult to deliver gently no matter how he chose his words.

"A witness saw her taken, Mr. Carter," Bentley said, without preamble, because Frank Carter was not a man who wanted his information softened. "Two men, a black SUV, a partial plate. She fought them. She didn't go willingly. I'm sorry to tell you that over the phone, but I promised you the truth as I found it, not a version I dressed up to spare your feelings."

There was a long silence on the line, thick enough that Bentley could hear Grace's voice faintly in the background, asking what had happened, and then Frank's breath, unsteady for just a moment before he mastered it. "Taken," he repeated, quietly, as though testing the word's full weight for the first time since his daughter vanished. "Twenty-two years I told grieving families that not knowing was worse than the worst answer. I never understood how true that was until right now, hearing my own daughter didn't just walk away from her life." His voice steadied. "Thank you, Mr. Blackwood. For telling me straight."

"There's more," Bentley said. "The witness who saw it was shot tonight, protecting what he knew. He'll live. But I want you and your wife to understand what we're up against, plainly, before this goes any further. Whoever's behind this doesn't hesitate."

"Neither do we," Frank said, and for a moment Bentley heard, beneath the grief, the flat, steady resolve of the police sergeant Frank Carter had once been. "Find her, Mr. Blackwood. Whatever it costs."

At the hospital two hours later, Calloway lay pale against white sheets, his shoulder bandaged, his daughter's photograph propped on the nightstand where a nurse had thoughtfully placed it after Sarah retrieved it from his wallet. His voice, when Bentley sat down beside the bed, had steadied into something quieter than fear.

"I prayed, you know," Calloway said, staring at the ceiling. "Standing at that window, before you got me moving. Didn't even think about it, it just came out — 'Lord, not like this, not with my girl waiting on me.' Haven't prayed like that since my wife passed." He turned his head slowly toward Bentley. "You believe in that sort of thing, Mr. Blackwood? Praying at the last second, when there's nothing left to do but ask?"

Bentley considered the question longer than he had considered any question in recent memory, thinking of Grace Carter's steady voice across his own desk, of two Bibles worn thin at the same verse, of a wife who had prayed before every dangerous interview she'd ever conducted and had, in the end, prayed alone in a car on a wet mountain road that no one had ever explained to him. "I don't know what I believe yet, Mr. Calloway," he said finally, honestly. "But I know

you're alive right now, and I know your daughter still has her father, and I'm not in any position to tell you that's a coincidence."

Sarah found him in the hallway outside the room a few minutes later, two vending machine coffees in hand, offering him one without comment. They stood together for a while in the fluorescent quiet of the hospital corridor, neither of them speaking, the particular companionable silence of two people who had shared enough dangerous nights together that words felt, for the moment, unnecessary.

"You froze for half a second back there," Sarah said finally, not unkindly. "When the window broke. I saw it."

"Half a second is a long time in a room with a gun in it."

"It is," she agreed. "I'm not criticizing you, Bentley. I'm telling you what I saw, because I think you should hear it from someone who isn't going to let you pretend it didn't happen. You saw Calloway standing where Rachel should have been standing, for half a second, and it cost you time you didn't have to spare."

Bentley did not deny it. He had felt it himself, in the compressed, adrenaline-slowed chaos of the shooting — a flicker of memory, unbidden and unwelcome, superimposing a mountain road onto a suburban kitchen, a woman he had failed to save onto a man he had, this time, managed to reach in time. "It won't happen again," he said.

"I know it won't," Sarah said, "because you're going to do what you always do, which is turn the fear into fuel instead of letting it slow you down. I just want you to notice it happening, Bentley, instead of burying it the way you buried everything else for six years. Noticing is the first step toward not repeating it."

He did not answer that directly, but he did not argue with it either, which Sarah seemed to understand as its own kind of agreement. They finished the bitter vending machine coffee in silence, side by side against the corridor wall, until a nurse came to tell them Calloway was stable and resting, and it was time, for tonight at least, to let him sleep.

"Trust in the LORD, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed."

— Psalm 37:3



Mason had the partial plate running against every registered SUV in the state before Bentley made it back to Larkspur Street, and by the time he walked through the office door, Mason was already turning his monitor around with the particular energy of a man who had found exactly what he was hoping for.

"Eleven vehicles match G-R-K as a starting sequence within a hundred miles," Mason said. "Only one of them is a black SUV. Only one of them is registered to a fleet account under Ashford Falls Municipal Solutions LLC — the same holding company that owns Meridian Systems Group, the same holding company Damian Cross personally authorized four years ago." He let that settle before he continued. "It gets better. Or worse, depending how you want to look at it. The fleet account has a secondary authorized user listed for maintenance and dispatch purposes. Name on the account is Marcus Vane."

Victoria, standing at the whiteboard where she had begun sketching a timeline of the investigation's growing web of connections, capped her marker slowly. "That's not circumstantial anymore, Bentley. That's a company vehicle, registered under a name we've already placed at the scene of a witness's shooting and inside the building Emily was taken from. If we can put that SUV, or Vane himself, anywhere near Calloway's house tonight, we have enough to force Delgado's hand, corrupted captain or not."

"Then let's find it," Bentley said, and something in his voice had hardened into a register none of them had heard from him since the case began — not anger, exactly, but the particular, focused resolve of a man who had just watched a frightened father nearly die for the crime of

telling the truth, and had decided, somewhere in the space of that single gunshot, precisely how much further he was willing to go to make sure it meant something.

"Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the LORD delivereth him out of them all."

— **Psalm 34:19**



Bentley added the new pages to the Cross Investigation folder that night, alone in his office once more, the pocket watch resting closed on the desk beside him rather than hidden away in his jacket, as though some part of him had decided it no longer needed to be kept at arm's length from the work.

Witness testimony — Raymond Calloway, maintenance staff — confirms Emily Carter abducted by two men, forced into black SUV, partial plate G-R-K. Meridian Systems representative (Vane) contacted witness pre-emptively to ensure silence. Attempt made on witness's life following renewed contact with this investigation — confirms active, ongoing surveillance of persons connected to the case.

He set down his pen and sat for a long moment in the quiet of the office, listening to the building settle around him, thinking of a frightened man's whispered prayer at a kitchen window, and of a verse that had followed this case since its very first hour, underlined in two separate Bibles by a woman who had understood, long before Bentley did, that nothing stayed covered forever — not even the things a powerful man spent a fortune trying to keep buried.

"For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— **Luke 12:2**

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Pastor's Warning

"Ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart."

— Jeremiah 29:13

Grace Carter called Bentley two mornings after the shooting to ask, with the particular careful humility of a woman who did not want to overstep, whether he would be willing to meet with her pastor. Bentley's first instinct was to decline politely and redirect the conversation back to the plate number Mason had traced and the surveillance footage Sarah was still working to pull from three additional traffic cameras along Emily's route. His second instinct, arriving a beat behind the first and considerably harder to dismiss, was the memory of Grace's voice across his own desk five days earlier. I don't need you to have faith. I have enough for both of us. I just need you to look.

"He's driven in from Millbrook already," Grace said, before Bentley could shape a refusal into something gracious. "He's been praying over this case since the morning Emily didn't come home, Mr. Blackwood, and he asked to see you specifically. Says he has something he thinks you should hear, about Emily, from before any of this happened."

That last detail was the one that changed Bentley's mind. Not the prayer. The information.

"In thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore."

— Psalm 16:11



Pastor Elijah Grant arrived at Blackwood Investigations a little after ten, and Bentley's first impression of the man was one of quiet, unhurried substance — not the polished, camera-

ready warmth Bentley had grown suspicious of at Cross Tower two days earlier, but something older and plainer, the particular gravity of a man who had spent forty years sitting with people through the worst days of their lives and had never once needed to perform his own goodness while doing it. He was in his late sixties, silver-haired, dressed in a simple gray sweater rather than any clerical collar, and he shook Bentley's hand with a grip that was firm without being forceful, the handshake of a man entirely comfortable with silence.

"Mr. Blackwood," he said. "Grace tells me you've been carrying more of this case's weight than any one man ought to carry alone. I won't take much of your time. I only wanted to see your face while I told you what I came to say."

Mason, who had grown up in a household that treated churches mostly as buildings other people disappeared into on Sunday mornings, watched Grant cross the office with open curiosity, and later admitted to Victoria that he'd expected someone louder — the kind of preacher he'd occasionally caught on late-night television, all performance and volume. Grant was the opposite of that in every visible way, and Mason found himself, without quite meaning to, sitting a little straighter at his own desk simply because the older man's presence seemed to demand a kind of attention that had nothing to do with authority and everything to do with the quiet, settled weight of someone who meant every word he said.

Bentley gestured him to the chair across from his desk — the same chair Frank and Grace had sat in six days earlier, the same chair that had, in the time since, held Sarah, Mason, Victoria, and a frightened maintenance worker's fear-worn statement. "I appreciate your concern for the Carters, Pastor Grant. I'll be honest with you — I'm not a man who finds much use for religious counsel in the middle of an active investigation. I mean no disrespect by saying so."

"None taken," Grant said, settling into the chair with the unhurried ease of a man who had heard some version of that sentence a thousand times over the course of his ministry. "I'm not here to counsel you, Mr. Blackwood. I'm here because I knew Emily Carter since she was eleven years old, and I think there are things I understand about her that might matter to your

investigation, whether or not you and I ever agree about anything else." *"A friend loveth at all times, and a brother is born for adversity."*

— Proverbs 17:17



"I baptized her," Grant said, "the summer she turned twelve, in the creek behind the old church building before we ever had a proper baptistry. I watched her grow into the kind of young woman who couldn't walk past an injustice without doing something about it, which her father will tell you started the day he let her ride in his cruiser and watched a con man go to prison because somebody finally wrote the truth down. I officiated her confirmation. I counseled her, more times than I could count, through the ordinary struggles of growing up in a small town with big convictions. And three months ago, she came to see me privately, in my study, more frightened than I had ever seen her in twenty-nine years of knowing that girl."

Bentley leaned forward slightly, the investigator in him rising instinctively above the skeptic. "What did she tell you?"

"She told me she'd found something that could destroy a very powerful man, and that the closer she got to publishing it, the more certain she became that he already knew she was coming for him." Grant's voice remained steady, measured, but something moved behind his eyes, the particular grief of a man recalling a conversation he now understood, in hindsight, as a warning he had not been able to prevent. "I asked her if she was afraid. She said yes, plainly, without any shame in admitting it. And then she told me something I've turned over in my mind every day since she vanished. She said, 'Pastor, I keep thinking about Luke twelve, two. Nothing covered that won't be revealed. I used to think that verse was a comfort. Lately I think it might also be a warning — that when the truth finally comes out, it might cost the person who uncovered it everything they have.'"

"For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— **Luke 12:2**

Bentley sat with that for a long moment, the office quiet around them, Mason and Victoria both — he noted with some surprise — having gone unusually still at their own desks, listening without pretending not to. "Did she say who the powerful man was?"

"She didn't name him to me directly. She was careful about that, even with someone she trusted completely — I think she understood, better than most, how dangerous certain knowledge could be to the people who held it." Grant folded his hands in his lap. "But she said one more thing before she left my study that day, and it's the reason I drove two hours to sit in this chair. She said, 'If anything happens to me, Pastor, I don't want anyone chasing my story out of anger. Anger burns hot and goes out. I want whoever comes looking to chase it out of something that doesn't run out — the way You never run out, no matter how long it takes You to answer.'"

"The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end."

— **Lamentations 3:22**



"I appreciate you telling me that, Pastor Grant," Bentley said, after a moment, choosing his words with care. "It's useful context. It confirms what I've already come to believe — that Emily Carter understood exactly how dangerous her situation had become, and prepared for it deliberately rather than walking into it blindly. That's evidence I can use."

"Evidence," Grant repeated, not unkindly, something almost like gentle amusement touching the corners of his eyes. "May I ask you something, Mr. Blackwood, and you can tell me plainly if the question oversteps?"

"Go ahead."

"What do you do with a piece of information that matters, but that you can't measure, can't photograph, and can't enter into whatever file you're building on this case?" Grant asked it without any edge, a genuine question rather than a rhetorical trap. "Because in forty years of ministry, I've found that the most important truths in a person's life are almost never the kind you can hold in your hand. They're the kind you either learn to trust, or you spend your whole life waiting for proof that never quite arrives in the form you demanded it."

"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

— **Hebrews 11:1**

"With respect, Pastor, that's precisely the kind of statement that's easy to make from a pulpit and difficult to apply to a missing person's case," Bentley said, and he heard, even as he said it, an edge in his own voice he hadn't intended to let through. "I've spent my career finding people who don't want to be found, and proving things other people insisted couldn't be proven. Faith is a comfort for people willing to accept an answer they can't verify. I'm not willing to accept that. I never have been."

"May I ask why?"

It was not an accusatory question. Grant asked it the way he seemed to ask everything — with genuine curiosity, room enough for whatever answer came, no judgment loaded into the waiting. And something about the plainness of it, the absence of any performance, made Bentley answer more honestly than he had intended to answer a stranger he had known for less than twenty minutes.

Victoria, listening from her desk with the particular stillness of a woman who had spent a career learning to read a room without appearing to, spoke up before Bentley could answer, surprising all three of them. "May I ask you something too, Pastor, since we're already being direct with each other?"

"Of course."

"I've spent eleven years studying men who believe they're doing good while causing enormous harm," Victoria said. "Damian Cross, the man at the center of this case, gave a public answer once about why his company monitors millions of people. He said freedom creates chaos, and control creates peace. I've read that sentence a hundred times, and I still can't decide if he's lying to everyone who hears it, or if he genuinely believes it. I don't suppose you have a professional opinion on the difference."

Grant considered the question with the same unhurried care he seemed to give everything. "Scripture has a name for that particular error, Ms. Moreno, and it's older than any surveillance company. 'Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil.' A man convinced that control is love doesn't need to lie to himself, because he's already redefined the words. That's not a modern invention. That's the oldest deception there is — the serpent in the garden didn't tell Eve a lie so much as he offered her a different definition of good, one that put her own judgment above God's. Every tyrant since has offered some version of the same bargain. Submit to my control, and I'll call it peace."

Bentley found himself listening more closely than he had expected to, filing the observation away not as a matter of faith but as a piece of behavioral insight worth keeping regardless of its source. "That's a fairly precise diagnosis for a man you've never met."

"I've met a great many versions of him over forty years, Mr. Blackwood," Grant said quietly. "The names change. The shape of the lie almost never does."

"Because I prayed for six years that my wife's death would make sense to me eventually," Bentley said quietly. "I prayed the way she taught me to pray, back when I still believed prayer accomplished something. And nothing ever came back. No answer. No evidence. No seam in the accident report, no piece that didn't fit, nothing at all except an empty road and a case file that told me everything and explained nothing. I stopped believing prayer was worth the effort of hoping, Pastor Grant, because hope that goes unanswered for six years eventually just becomes another kind of grief."

"Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life."

— **Proverbs 13:12**



Grant was quiet for a long moment, and when he finally spoke, his voice had lost none of its gentleness but had gained something Bentley had not expected — a kind of unhurried directness that did not flinch from the pain Bentley had just admitted to.

"I'm not going to tell you your grief is wrong, Mr. Blackwood, or that six years of unanswered prayer should have felt like anything other than exactly what it felt like," Grant said. "I buried my own wife eleven years ago, and I promise you I know something of what an empty road and an unanswered question can do to a man's faith. I'm not here to talk you out of your grief. I'm here to suggest, gently, that you might be asking your grief to do a job it was never built for."

"Which job is that?"

"You've spent six years demanding that grief answer the question of whether God exists, whether prayer works, whether faith is real," Grant said. "But grief was never built to answer those questions, Mr. Blackwood, any more than a magnifying glass was built to weigh a stone. Grief is built to be carried, not solved. A detective searches for evidence. A believer searches for meaning. I've found, in forty years of walking beside people through the worst nights of their lives, that sometimes God provides both — but rarely on the timeline we'd choose for Him, and rarely in the form we'd have specified if He'd asked our opinion first."

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD."

— **Isaiah 55:8**

Bentley found, to his own quiet surprise, that he had no immediate rebuttal ready. He had spent six years constructing arguments against exactly this kind of statement, arguments he could deploy without conscious effort against well-meaning relatives, against the hospital chaplain who had sat with him the night Rachel's body was identified, against Sarah's own gentle attempts, over the years, to draw him back toward something he had long since decided was closed to him. But Grant's words did not arrive as an argument to be defeated. They arrived, instead, as a simple observation, offered without pressure, and Bentley found he had nothing prepared to counter an observation that made no demand of him at all.



"I'll tell you something else, since you've been generous enough to hear me out this far," Grant said, rising to leave, his hand resting briefly on the back of the chair. "I don't believe faith and evidence are enemies, Mr. Blackwood, whatever your years at the Bureau might have taught you to assume. I think they're two different instruments built to measure two different things, and a wise man learns to use both rather than insisting one can do the other's job. You'll find the truth about what happened to Emily Carter through evidence — the notebook, the footage, the financial trail your young man is chasing. I have no doubt of that. You're plainly gifted at it, and I don't say that lightly."

"But?"

"But when you find her — and I believe, with everything in me, that you will — I don't think evidence alone is going to be enough to carry you through what you find on the other side of that discovery. Emily didn't leave that verse open on her desk by accident, Mr. Blackwood. She left it because she understood something you haven't let yourself consider yet: that some things stay hidden not because no one is looking hard enough, but because we aren't always ready, yet, to see them." Grant extended his hand once more. "I'll be praying for you, whether you want me to or not. I find that's usually when it matters most."

"Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed."

— **John 20:29**



After Grant left, Bentley sat alone at his desk for a long time, the office settling into the particular hush that fell over it whenever Mason and Victoria, sensing something they didn't fully understand, made themselves quietly scarce with the excuse of separate errands. He did not immediately return to the case files spread across the central table. Instead, he found himself reaching, almost without deciding to, for the evidence bag containing the photographs he had taken of Emily's two Bibles — the newsroom copy and the nightstand copy, both worn soft at the same page, both underlined in the same patient blue ink.

For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known.

He had read the verse a dozen times in the last week, filing it each time as a data point, a psychological marker, evidence of a woman's mental state in the weeks before her disappearance. He read it now, for the first time, as something else entirely — not evidence to be catalogued, but a sentence a frightened woman had chosen to anchor herself to, over and over, in the months before the world closed over her. He thought of Grant's words. Some things stay hidden not because no one is looking hard enough, but because we aren't always ready, yet, to see them.

"Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you."

— **James 4:8**

He opened the bottom drawer where Rachel's incident file still sat, reopened four nights earlier and not yet closed again, and beside it, where it had sat untouched for longer than he wanted to calculate, a small leather Bible of his own — a gift from his own mother, decades old now, its cover cracked in places that had nothing to do with use and everything to do with simple

age and long neglect. He did not open it. He was not ready, not yet, to open it, and some honest part of him understood the difference between a man testing an idea and a man surrendering to one, and knew he had not crossed that line tonight.

But he set it on the corner of his desk instead of returning it to the drawer, where it remained, closed but present, for the rest of the investigation that followed.

"Seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you."

— Luke 11:9



Sarah found him there an hour later, when she returned from the traffic camera canvass with a partial license capture that finally, definitively, matched the SUV registered under Marcus Vane's fleet account to the alley behind Calloway's neighborhood at 9:47 that same evening. She noticed the small Bible on the corner of his desk before she said a word about the footage, and something in her expression — surprise, carefully suppressed, and beneath it, something gentler — told Bentley she understood exactly what its presence there meant, even if neither of them was prepared to discuss it directly.

"Pastor Grant came by," Bentley said, by way of explanation, before she could ask.

"I heard. Grace called me too, actually, hoping I'd encourage you to see him." Sarah set the footage printout down on the desk, but her eyes stayed on the small Bible a moment longer. "How was it?"

"Uncomfortable," Bentley admitted. "He told me something useful about Emily — she came to him three months ago, frightened, already anticipating something like this might happen. Confirmed the timeline, confirmed her state of mind, gave me one more piece of the picture." He paused, choosing his next words more carefully than he usually bothered to with Sarah. "He also told me a few things that had nothing to do with evidence at all. I don't know what to do with those yet."

"You don't have to know what to do with them tonight," Sarah said, sitting down across from him in the same chair Grant had occupied an hour earlier. "You just have to be honest that they landed somewhere. That's usually where these things start, Bentley — not with an answer, just with a question you can't quite set back down."

"He said something else, right before he left," Bentley said, turning the small Bible slightly on the desk, not opening it, just adjusting its angle the way a man might straighten a photograph he wasn't yet ready to look at directly. "He said evidence and faith aren't enemies. That they're two different instruments built to measure two different things, and a wise man learns to use both instead of insisting one can replace the other." He shook his head slowly. "Six years ago I would have argued with that sentence until one of us gave up. Tonight I don't have an argument ready. I don't know what that means."

"Maybe it means you're tired of carrying the argument alone," Sarah said gently. "You've spent six years being the only person in the room who refused to let anything in that couldn't be measured and weighed first. That's a heavy way to grieve, Bentley. I watched you do it every single day, and I never once told you how heavy it looked from the outside, because I didn't think you were ready to hear it. I'm not sure you're ready tonight either. But I think you're closer than you were a week ago."

Bentley didn't answer that directly, but he didn't dismiss it either, which had become, over the last week, its own quiet form of agreement between them. He looked instead at the footage printout on the desk, at Marcus Vane's SUV frozen mid-frame two blocks from a shooting, and let the case pull his attention back to the ground it understood best, even as some smaller, more persistent part of him stayed exactly where Pastor Grant had left it.

"Be still, and know that I am God."

— Psalm 46:10

Bentley looked at the footage she'd brought — Marcus Vane's company SUV, caught at last on a timestamped camera two blocks from a shooting that had nearly cost a frightened father

his life — and felt the case shift forward another degree, evidence stacking on evidence the way it always did when an investigation finally found its momentum. But some part of his attention, quieter and more persistent than he wanted to admit, stayed with the small worn Bible sitting closed on the corner of his desk, and with a verse two women — one missing, one six years gone — had each, in their own way, chosen to build their courage around.

For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known.

He did not know, yet, whether he believed it meant anything beyond the evidentiary. But for the first time in six years, he found he was no longer entirely certain it didn't.

"For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— Luke 12:2

CHAPTER EIGHT

Erased

"He revealeth the deep and secret things: he knoweth what is in the darkness, and the light dwelleth with him."

— Daniel 2:22

Priya Anand called Bentley at seven the next morning, her voice tight with a fury she was clearly struggling to keep professional. "The footage is gone," she said, without preamble. "The Herald's lobby security recordings, the ones I personally backed up the day after Emily disappeared. I checked the archive this morning to pull a clean copy for you, and the files are corrupted. Every single one, from the night she vanished specifically, and only that night. The days before and after are untouched."

Bentley was already reaching for his jacket before she finished the sentence. "Corrupted how?"

"I don't know computers well enough to answer that properly. Our IT contractor took one look at it and told me it wasn't ordinary file corruption — said it looked deliberate, professional, done by someone who knew exactly what he was overwriting and why. He seemed rattled, honestly, which is not a word I'd normally use to describe our IT contractor."

Bentley met the contractor in person an hour later, a soft-spoken man named Elias Kim who had managed the Herald's modest network for nine years without, by his own account, ever encountering anything he couldn't explain by lunchtime. He was visibly unsettled as he walked Bentley through the corrupted archive on his laptop, pointing at file headers that looked, to Bentley's untrained eye, like ordinary gibberish.

"See this?" Kim said, tapping the screen. "Normal corruption is messy. Random. A drive fails, a file gets truncated, you get garbage data scattered without any logic to it. This isn't that. This is clean. Whoever did this didn't crash anything — they specifically targeted these files, and only these files, and overwrote them with a precision I don't have the equipment to reverse. I've been doing this nine years, Mr. Blackwood. I've never seen anything built this carefully just to make sure something disappears."

"Could this have been done remotely?"

"Had to be. Nobody physically touched our server room that week — I have the access logs to prove it, for whatever that's worth to you at this point." Kim gave a short, humorless laugh. "Given what you've just told me about the garage and that bakery's stand-alone unit, I'd guess whoever did this doesn't need physical access to anything anymore. That should scare you more than it scares me, honestly, and I'm already fairly scared."

"For nothing is secret, that shall not be made manifest; neither any thing hid, that shall not be known and come abroad."

— Luke 8:17



By nine o'clock, the pattern had become unmistakable. The bakery's exterior camera, the one Sarah had found through nothing more sophisticated than asking a shop owner a polite question, had likewise gone dark — its stand-alone DVR unit, which the owner swore had never been connected to any network in the eleven years he'd owned the shop, wiped clean of every recording from the relevant date, though every other day's footage sat untouched on the same drive. The garage's own security system, the copy the department had supposedly preserved as evidence, had been "lost during a routine server migration," according to a terse email Sarah extracted after two hours of increasingly pointed phone calls to records management.

"Three separate systems," Mason said, standing at the whiteboard with his arms crossed, staring at the timeline Victoria had mapped across it in careful, color-coded ink. "Different owners, different networks, one of them not even connected to the internet in any conventional sense. And all three lose exactly the footage that matters, in exactly the same window, within days of each other." He shook his head slowly. "That's not a coincidence. That's not even ordinary hacking. That's something built for this specific purpose, deployed by someone with resources I don't usually see outside a few government contractors I try very hard not to think about."

Bentley looked at the whiteboard, at the neat, damning symmetry of it, and felt the same cold certainty settle into his chest that had been building since his visit to Cross Tower three days earlier. "Ambient safety infrastructure," he said quietly, quoting the phrase from Cross Global's own marketing materials. "I wonder how much of that infrastructure runs in the other direction."

"Woe unto them that seek deep to hide their counsel from the LORD, and their works are in the dark, and they say, Who seeth us? and who knoweth us?"

— Isaiah 29:15



"I want to be honest with you about what I'm facing," Mason said, when the team gathered around his desk that afternoon, three monitors now dedicated entirely to the recovery effort. "Whoever did this didn't just delete files. Deletion leaves a footprint — most people don't understand that hitting delete just tells the system it's allowed to write over the space eventually, which means with the right tools and enough time, you can usually pull most of it back. What I'm looking at here is different. This is a secure wipe, multiple passes, purpose-built to make sure nothing recoverable survives underneath. I've seen this exact signature exactly once before, in a training case study at a conference two years ago, presented by a data forensics firm that specializes in advising intelligence agencies on evidence destruction. It's not commercial software. It's proprietary. Somebody built this specifically to make sure things like this investigation never happen."

"But you don't think it's perfect," Bentley said, watching Mason's face, reading the particular focus of a man who had already found the seam he needed and was simply working out how to widen it.

"Nothing's ever perfect," Mason said, and something like the old sharpness returned to his voice, the restless confidence Bentley had first recognized in him two years earlier. "A secure wipe protects the primary storage. It doesn't always account for every cache, every thumbnail preview a system generates automatically, every fragment that gets shuffled off to a temp directory before the main file's even finished saving. Whoever built this tool is good — genuinely, frighteningly good — but they built it to erase footage fast and thoroughly, not to hunt down every stray crumb an operating system leaves behind without being asked. I've been finding crumbs since about two this morning."

*"He discovereth deep things out of darkness, and bringeth out to light the shadow
of death."*

— Job 12:22



Mason worked through the night and into the following day, fueled by a rotating supply of energy drinks that Bentley, for once, did not comment on. Victoria brought him food twice that he barely acknowledged eating, and Bentley found him, somewhere around three in the morning, asleep for eleven minutes with his forehead resting against his keyboard before he startled awake, muttered something about a checksum error, and went straight back to work as though the interruption had never happened.

"You don't have to do this in one sitting," Bentley told him, close to dawn, setting a fresh coffee beside the small mountain of empty cans.

"Yeah, I do," Mason said, not looking up from the screen. "Every hour I don't finish this is an hour that fragment sits there degrading further, and an hour Emily Carter's voice — if that's what's actually on this drive, and I think it is — gets a little closer to being unrecoverable forever. I've spent two years chasing down data other people wanted buried, Bentley. I'm not stopping three hours short of the finish line because I'm tired." He rubbed his eyes once, hard, and kept typing.

By four o'clock the second afternoon, he called the team back to his desk with the particular stillness of a man who had found something he wasn't entirely sure how to present.

"Two things," he said. "First — the metadata. Every deletion leaves a timestamp, even a secure wipe, because the operating system logs when a process runs even if it can't recover what the process destroyed. I pulled the deletion logs from the garage's server before that convenient migration wiped the footage itself. The wipe command on the garage system was issued at 1:47 a.m. the night Emily disappeared — ninety minutes after she vanished, and four hours before Priya ever noticed she was missing, six hours before anyone called the police."

The room went very quiet.

"Somebody knew to erase that footage before there was any missing person's report to erase it from," Bentley said slowly. "Which means somebody at Cross Global — or somebody

working for them — had confirmation Emily was gone within ninety minutes of it happening. Not suspicion. Confirmation. Fast enough to trigger an evidence destruction protocol before her own employer noticed she hadn't come home."

"Be sure your sin will find you out."

— **Numbers 32:23**

"It gets worse," Mason said quietly. "I traced the wipe command's origin point — the terminal that issued it, not just the system it ran on. It didn't come from inside Cross Global's own network. It came from an IP address registered to the Ashford Falls Police Department's records division."

Sarah went very still. "Say that again."

"Somebody inside the department, using department equipment, on a department network, remotely triggered the deletion of evidence in an active missing person's case," Mason said, "ninety minutes after the crime occurred, hours before it was officially reported, and days before Delgado's team supposedly discovered the footage was already gone. That's not negligence, Sarah. That's not a captain quietly deciding to slow-walk an investigation. That's someone inside your former department actively destroying evidence on Cross Global's behalf, in real time, the same night Emily disappeared."

"There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known."

— **Matthew 10:26**



Sarah sat down heavily, running a hand through her hair, the particular exhaustion of a woman confronting a betrayal that touched an institution she had once trusted with eleven years of her own service. "I need a name, Mason. Whoever's terminal that was."

"Working on it. Whoever accessed it either used a shared login or covered their tracks reasonably well on that end, which tells me it's someone who understood enough about internal security to be careful, but not someone with Mason-level tradecraft, thankfully for us. I'll have a name within a day, maybe two."

Bentley absorbed the revelation in the particular silence he reserved for moments when a case shifted its entire shape beneath him — not surprise, exactly, but the sober recalibration of a man realizing the danger he was standing in had just grown considerably larger than he'd allowed himself to believe. "This isn't a company with influence over a police department anymore," he said. "This is a company with an active asset inside it. Someone drawing a badge and a paycheck from this city while working, in whatever capacity, for Damian Cross."

"Which means Delgado might not even know," Victoria said. "If this is compartmentalized the way everything else about Cross Global seems to be, the corrupted captain who buried the case and the person who triggered this wipe might not be the same individual, and Delgado himself might be nothing worse than an overworked detective following orders he doesn't fully understand the reason for."

"Or he's exactly who Frank Carter already suspects he is," Bentley said. "We don't know yet. And until we do, every conversation with anyone still wearing that badge happens on the assumption that it might be relayed to Marcus Vane within the hour."

Sarah spent the following morning inside the department itself, using the last threads of her old standing to request access to the records division's shift logs for the night in question, framing the request as routine follow-up on an open personnel matter rather than anything connected to the Carter case. It cost her, she admitted afterward, a debt of goodwill she wasn't sure she'd ever be able to repay to the one remaining friend she trusted there — a records clerk named Denise who had worked alongside her a decade earlier and who slid the printed logs across a coffee shop table two blocks from the precinct with visible nerves, glancing twice toward the door before she spoke.

"Three people had terminal access in records that night," Denise said quietly. "Two of them clocked out before midnight, badge logs confirm it, they weren't even in the building. The third was working an overnight shift alone, which isn't unusual, we're short-staffed most nights. I pulled his personnel file before I came here, Sarah, because I had a feeling you were going to ask me the next question, and I wanted to already have an answer."

"And?"

"Six months ago, he financed a boat he had no business affording on a records clerk's salary. Paid it off in full, cash, four months later." Denise slid a second sheet across the table, a name typed at the top. "I don't know what he's mixed up in, Sarah. I don't want to know. But I know you, and I know you wouldn't be asking unless it mattered more than my discomfort telling you."

"Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding."

— **Proverbs 3:5**



The second thing Mason had found took longer to explain, and he approached it with a visible reluctance that Bentley had rarely seen in the young man before.

"The bakery's DVR wasn't networked, like I said, which actually made it easier in one specific way — whoever wiped it had to do it locally, probably through a compromised firmware update pushed the same night, which means the wipe tool left more forensic residue on that unit than the two networked systems combined. I recovered a fragment. It's short. It's degraded. The video's mostly gone, just broken blocks of color that don't resolve into anything useful. But the audio channel survived in better shape than the video did, and I want you to understand, before you listen to this, that it's not going to be easy to hear."

He turned his monitor around, and the small speaker beside it crackled to life with eleven seconds of badly degraded audio — wind noise, the distant hiss of rain, footsteps, and then, unmistakable even through the distortion, a woman's voice, breathless, frightened, and underneath the fear, something else entirely, something steadier.

"Let go — please, just — 'for there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed' — you can't — nothing stays hidden, not from Him, not ever—"

A man's voice cut across hers, low, controlled, impossible to fully make out except for four words that survived the degradation with terrible clarity. "Get her in now."

Then the recording dissolved into static, and the eleven seconds ended.

"The eyes of the LORD are in every place, beholding the evil and the good."

— **Proverbs 15:3**



No one spoke for a long moment after the recording finished. Bentley stood very still, his hand closed around the pocket watch in his jacket without any conscious decision to reach for it, listening to the echo of eleven seconds that had just made a missing person into a woman with a voice, a woman who had spent what might have been the last free moments of her life reciting Scripture to the men forcing her into a vehicle, not as a plea for their mercy but as a declaration of something she believed more durable than whatever they intended to do to her.

"Play it again," Bentley said quietly.

Mason did, and this time Bentley listened not for the plot, not for the evidentiary value of the male voice's four recoverable words, but for Emily Carter herself — the particular register of courage under duress that he recognized, with an ache he had not expected, because he had heard something almost identical once before, eleven years earlier, in a different woman's voice, on a different night that had also ended without a clean answer.

"She wasn't just afraid," Victoria said softly, breaking the silence. "Listen to the cadence. That's not a woman falling apart. That's a woman choosing what to say with the little control she had left. She knew, in that moment, that she might not walk away from it. And she chose to spend some of her last free breath declaring that whatever they did to her, it wouldn't stay hidden."

"For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

— **2 Corinthians 4:17**

Sarah was the first to move, crossing the office to stand beside Bentley, her voice low. "You're somewhere else again."

"I'm right here," Bentley said, and found, to his own quiet surprise, that it was true — not lost in the mountain road this time, not superimposing Rachel's absence onto Emily's, but present, entirely, in the specific and terrible reality of a young woman's voice choosing faith over fear in the last recorded seconds of her freedom. "I just heard something I don't think I was supposed to be capable of hearing anymore."

"What's that?"

Bentley looked at the frozen waveform on Mason's monitor, the small, jagged peaks and valleys that represented eleven seconds of a stranger's courage, and thought of two Bibles worn thin at the same page, and of a pastor's voice two days earlier telling him that grief was meant to be carried, not solved. "Hope," he said finally, quietly, "that doesn't depend on whether I can prove it yet."

"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

— **Hebrews 11:1**



That evening, Bentley added the day's discoveries to the growing Cross Investigation folder, his handwriting steadier than it had been in days, each new line building toward a shape the whole team could now see clearly forming beneath the case's surface.

Evidence destruction protocol triggered from AFPD internal terminal, 1:47 a.m., ninety minutes post-abduction — confirms active insider cooperation with Cross Global, likely unconnected to Capt. Reyes's separate obstruction. Recovered audio fragment (bakery DVR) — confirms Emily Carter's voice at scene of abduction, corroborates Calloway's testimony, records her final words before being forced into vehicle. Male voice partially recovered — four words, insufficient for identification, consistent with Vane's speech pattern per prior in-person interview.

He closed the folder and sat for a long moment in the quiet of the office, thinking of the four words that had survived eleven seconds of degraded audio — get her in now — spoken by a man Bentley now suspected, though could not yet prove, was the same voice that had offered him a rehearsed handshake in a glass lobby three days earlier. He thought, too, of the words that had survived alongside them, spoken by a woman who had understood, in the very worst moment of her life, that the truth she'd spent six months chasing was bigger than whatever was about to happen to her.

For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed. Nothing stays hidden, not from Him, not ever.

"I hear you," Bentley said quietly, to the empty office, to a recording he would carry with him for the rest of the investigation, to a small worn Bible still sitting closed on the corner of his desk. "I'm still listening."

He drove to Millbrook the next morning, alone, because he had decided the Carters deserved to hear Emily's voice from him directly rather than as a secondhand summary, however carefully worded. Grace answered the door and knew, before he said a single word, that he was carrying something that would cost her, and she reached for Frank's hand before she had even fully opened it wider to let Bentley inside.

He played the recording once, in their small, sunlit kitchen, and watched Grace close her eyes at the sound of her daughter's voice, her lips moving silently along with the words Bentley now knew by heart himself. Frank did not close his eyes. He listened with the flat, controlled stillness of a man determined not to break in front of his wife, his jaw working once, twice, before he trusted himself to speak.

"That's my girl," he said finally, roughly. "Scared out of her mind, and she's still preaching at them." A sound that was almost a laugh, almost a sob, escaped him. "That's exactly who she's always been."

Grace opened her eyes, and though tears stood in them, her voice, when it came, was steady in a way that reminded Bentley powerfully of her daughter's own recorded courage. "She wasn't alone in that alley, Mr. Blackwood, whatever it looked like on that recording. I need you to understand that the way I understand it. Whatever happens next, I need you to keep believing that too, even on the days it's easier not to."

*"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:
for thou art with me."*

— Psalm 23:4

*"There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be
known."*

— Luke 12:2

CHAPTER NINE

The Man Behind the Curtain

"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness."

— **Matthew 23:27**

Priya Anand secured the press credentials within a day of Bentley asking, sliding two laminated badges across her desk with the particular satisfaction of a woman who understood exactly what she was helping to set in motion. "The Ashford Falls Children's Hospital Gala," she said. "Cross Global's the lead sponsor this year, same as the last four. They're dedicating a new pediatric wing his foundation funded, and the Herald always sends someone to cover the philanthropy beat, mostly because Cross Global buys enough advertising that my publisher insists on it. I'm assigning you and your colleague as my reporting team tonight. Try not to get me fired."

"I'll do my best," Bentley said, though privately he suspected the promise carried an asterisk neither of them wanted spoken aloud.

"For the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart."

— **1 Samuel 16:7**



The gala occupied the Ashford Grand Hotel's top-floor ballroom, a vast, glittering space of crystal chandeliers and floor-to-ceiling windows that framed the city's skyline like a painting commissioned specifically to remind everyone in the room how far above the ordinary world they currently stood. Bentley arrived at seven in a black tuxedo he wore as rarely as possible, Sarah beside him in deep green, both of them carrying credentials that identified them as press

rather than guests — a distinction that granted them access without quite granting them belonging, which suited Bentley's purposes considerably better than an invitation would have.

"Four hundred guests," Sarah murmured, scanning the room with the practiced efficiency of a woman who had spent years reading crowds for threats before she'd ever learned to read them for gossip. "Half the city's money in one ballroom, and every one of them applauding a man who builds machines to watch them while they sleep."

"Most of them don't know that's what they're applauding," Bentley said. "That's rather the point of an evening like this one."

At the center of the ballroom's far wall, a massive video screen played a looping montage — smiling children in hospital beds, doctors in crisp white coats, the warm, orchestral swell of music engineered to produce exactly the emotional response it produced in nearly everyone around Bentley except himself. The final frame of the loop displayed Cross Global's corporate mark beside a simple tagline: WATCHING OVER WHAT MATTERS MOST. Bentley studied the phrase for a long moment, turning it over the way he turned over any piece of language chosen with too much care to be accidental, and found himself thinking of Marcus Vane's rehearsed lobby greeting, of a coffee-tray employee's involuntary glance toward a ceiling dome, of eleven surviving seconds of audio in which a frightened woman had quoted Scripture to men forcing her into a vehicle.

A young Cross Global executive, badge still clipped to his lapel out of what looked like habit rather than necessity, drifted past them near the bar, and Sarah struck up an easy, unthreatening conversation with him about the wing's construction timeline while Bentley listened without appearing to. The man spoke fluently about square footage and donor tiers, but Bentley noticed, the way he had noticed it in the Cross Tower lobby, the same careful economy in his gestures, the same reflexive half-glance toward the nearest security presence whenever a question drifted even slightly outside his prepared talking points.

"Do you enjoy working there?" Sarah asked lightly, once the small talk had run its natural course.

"It's the best job I've ever had," the man said, and smiled, and Bentley watched the smile arrive a half-second later than the words did, the particular delay of a man reciting something he had been asked to believe rather than something he had simply, freely decided.

"For assuredly this man was also with him: for he is a Galilaean. And his speech agreeth thereto."

— **Luke 22:59**

"That which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God."

— **Luke 16:15**



Damian Cross took the small stage at eight o'clock, and Bentley watched him do it with the particular clinical attention he had once reserved for the most dangerous interview subjects of his career — not distracted by the man's charisma, which was, Bentley had to admit, considerable, but cataloguing it, measuring its seams, searching for the places where performance met person and neither quite matched the other.

Cross was lean, silver-templed, exactly as his photographs suggested, though photographs had not fully prepared Bentley for the particular quality of his stillness in motion — the way he crossed a stage without any wasted gesture, the way his voice carried to the back of a four-hundred-person ballroom without appearing to rise in volume at all, as though the room itself had simply agreed, in advance, to quiet down and listen.

"Six years ago," Cross said, "a little girl named Maya Ferris spent four months in a hospital bed two blocks from here, in a wing that hadn't been renovated since before her own parents were born. I visited her. I don't say that to flatter myself — I say it because that visit changed the direction of my company more than any board meeting ever has. I looked at that outdated ceiling tile above her bed and I thought, we have built machines that can identify a face

in a crowd of ten thousand people in under a second, and we have not yet built her a better hospital room. That seemed to me, gentlemen and ladies, like a failure of priority rather than a failure of capability. Tonight, because of the generosity in this room, that failure ends."

The applause that followed was long, warm, entirely genuine on the part of nearly everyone Bentley could see, and he found himself, despite every professional instinct telling him not to, momentarily uncertain whether he was watching a master manipulator or simply a complicated man capable of both extraordinary generosity and extraordinary harm, uninterested in resolving the contradiction for anyone's convenience but his own.

"Every way of a man is right in his own eyes: but the LORD pondereth the hearts."

— **Proverbs 21:2**



"He believes every word of that," Victoria said quietly, over the earpiece Mason had rigged for the evening, watching the speech from the agency's own monitors on a live stream the hotel's press pool provided. "That's what makes him so effective, Bentley. He's not lying about the hospital wing. He's not lying about the little girl. I'd guess he genuinely cried in that hospital room, and I'd guess it genuinely changed something in him. The danger isn't that he's insincere. The danger is that his sincerity and his cruelty come from the exact same place — a conviction that he alone understands what the world actually needs, and that anyone standing between him and providing it is an obstacle to be managed rather than a person to be reasoned with."

"Managed the way Emily Carter was managed."

"Managed exactly the way Emily Carter was managed," Victoria confirmed. "I don't think Damian Cross loses a single night's sleep over what happened to her, Bentley, and it won't be because he's a monster in the way people usually picture monsters. It'll be because he's already decided, somewhere in that remarkable mind of his, that whatever happened to her was a small

and necessary cost of the larger good he believes he's building. That's the profile that worries me most in this entire case. Men who know they're villains can sometimes be reasoned with, or at least predicted. Men who are certain they're heroes almost never can."

"A man's pride shall bring him low: but honour shall uphold the humble in spirit."

— Proverbs 29:23



Cross found Bentley twenty minutes later, which told Bentley a great deal in itself — a man with four hundred guests to circulate among did not simply stumble across one particular reporter by accident, especially not a reporter who had, three days earlier, stood in his own building's lobby asking uncomfortable questions of his Director of Corporate Security.

"Mr. Blackwood," Cross said, extending a hand with the same unhurried warmth he had shown the entire ballroom, though his eyes, up close, carried none of the performed softness his public speaking voice suggested. They were pale gray, remarkably still, the eyes of a man who had trained himself, long ago, never to let them widen in surprise or narrow in anger where anyone else might see it happen. "Marcus mentioned you'd taken an interest in my company. I confess I didn't expect you to attend tonight in press credentials rather than simply asking my office for a meeting directly."

"I find people are considerably more honest at a gala than they are across a conference table," Bentley said, matching the man's composure with his own. "Fewer prepared talking points. More champagne."

Something that might, in another man, have been the beginning of genuine amusement crossed Cross's face. "That's a very perceptive observation, Mr. Blackwood. Though I'd caution you — the people in this room who matter most have had a great deal of practice being honest and prepared at the same time. It's rather a prerequisite for surviving in rooms like this one."

"A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil."

— **Luke 6:45**



"I understand you're looking into Emily Carter's disappearance," Cross continued, his voice never rising, never sharpening, remaining throughout their entire exchange at the same measured, cordial register he might have used to discuss the weather. "A tragedy. She was talented — I read a great deal of her earlier work before she turned her attention to my company, and I want you to know, sincerely, that I found her a formidable journalist. Formidable people occasionally arrive at wrong conclusions with considerable conviction, Mr. Blackwood, but that doesn't diminish the talent it takes to build a case, even a flawed one."

"You think her reporting was flawed."

"I think her reporting was incomplete," Cross said. "She saw a company capable of watching people and assumed, understandably, that capability implied intent. She never asked the harder question — what does it cost a society to remain blind, when blindness is a choice rather than a limitation? Freedom feels wonderful right up until the moment it fails to protect the people we love, Mr. Blackwood. I've made peace with being the man willing to ask what freedom is actually worth, weighed against a child who never comes home, or a wife who never makes it back from an interview on a rainy night."

"Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour."

— **1 Peter 5:8**

Bentley went very still. He had not mentioned Rachel to this man, had not mentioned her to anyone at Cross Global, had guarded that particular piece of himself with a discipline he applied to almost nothing else in his professional life. And yet Damian Cross had reached for exactly that image — a wife, a rainy night, an interview that never ended — with a specificity that could not possibly have been coincidence, delivered with a gentleness that made the intrusion somehow worse than an open threat would have been.

"That's a remarkably specific example for a man discussing hypothetical policy," Bentley said, keeping his voice level through an act of will that cost him more than he would have admitted aloud.

"I read a great deal about the people I meet, Mr. Blackwood. It's simply good practice, in my position, to understand who's standing in front of me before I decide how honest to be with them." Cross's expression did not change, and that, Bentley understood in that moment with total clarity, was precisely the point — not to threaten him outright, which would have been clumsy and traceable, but to demonstrate, gently and deniably, the sheer depth of what he already knew. "I was very sorry to learn what happened to your wife. Six years, and I understand the case was never fully resolved. That must be an extraordinarily difficult thing to carry, especially for a man who has built his entire professional life around the conviction that every mystery has an answer, if only one looks hard enough."

"The words of his mouth were smoother than butter, but war was in his heart: his words were softer than oil, yet were they drawn swords."

— Psalm 55:21



Bentley held the man's gaze for a long moment, feeling something cold and absolutely certain settle into place beneath his ribs — not proof, not yet, nothing he could write into the Cross Investigation folder waiting for him back on Larkspur Street, but a conviction that arrived

with the same weight proof usually carried, earned through nine years of reading exactly this kind of controlled, deniable menace in exactly this kind of controlled, deniable man.

"Mr. Cross," he said quietly, "I've interviewed a great many people who wanted me to believe they were dangerous. Most of them were performing. You're the first one in longer than I can remember who isn't performing at all, and that tells me considerably more about you than anything else you've said tonight."

For just a moment — brief, controlled, and gone almost before it registered, the same flicker Bentley had caught in Marcus Vane's face three days earlier — something shifted behind Cross's pale, still eyes. Not fear. Bentley did not believe this man capable of fear in any conventional sense. Something closer to recalibration, the particular adjustment of a man realizing an opponent had proven sharper than his initial assessment had allowed for.

"May I ask you something in return, Mr. Cross?" Bentley said, before the man could excuse himself. "Purely out of professional curiosity. When you look at a city full of people who trust you enough to applaud you tonight, do you ever wonder whether that trust exists because you've earned it, or because you've built the tools to make sure it does?"

Cross considered the question with what appeared to be genuine, unhurried interest, tilting his head slightly, the practiced stillness of his expression allowing, for just a moment, something that might have been respect. "That's the best question anyone's asked me in this ballroom tonight, Mr. Blackwood, and I mean that sincerely. I'll give you an honest answer, since you've clearly earned one. I don't know anymore. I stopped being able to tell the difference a long time ago, and I've made my peace with not knowing, because the alternative — stopping, doubting, dismantling what I've built while I search for an answer I may never find — strikes me as a luxury only people who've never been responsible for anything larger than themselves can afford to indulge."

"That sounds like a very comfortable way to avoid the question."

"Perhaps," Cross said, and for the first time all evening, something in his voice carried the faintest trace of genuine weariness beneath its polish. "Or perhaps, Mr. Blackwood, it's

simply what it looks like to carry more weight than most men are ever asked to carry, and to have stopped expecting anyone standing outside that weight to understand the choices it requires."

"I look forward to seeing what you find, Mr. Blackwood," Cross said finally, and extended his hand once more, his composure fully restored, his voice returning to its warm, public register as though the previous exchange had never happened at all. "Truly. I find I don't get many opponents worth the effort of watching closely anymore. It will be refreshing."

"Prepare thine outward work in the field, and make it fit for thyself; and afterwards build thine house."

— **Proverbs 24:27**



Marcus Vane appeared at Cross's shoulder within seconds of the billionaire moving on to his next circle of guests, close enough that Bentley understood the timing had been deliberate rather than coincidental — Vane had been watching the entire exchange from a discreet distance, ready to step in the moment his employer walked away.

"Enjoying the evening, Mr. Blackwood?" Vane's professional smile had returned, though Bentley noted the particular tightness around his eyes that suggested the last exchange had cost him something too, watching his employer speak so casually, so specifically, about a dead woman neither of them had any business knowing details about.

"Immensely," Bentley said. "Your employer is a remarkably well-informed man."

"He makes a point of it." Vane's voice dropped, just slightly, just enough that Bentley understood the words that followed were not part of the evening's performance. "For what it's worth, Mr. Blackwood — and I'm not saying this as a threat, I'm saying it because I think you're smart enough to hear it as the warning it actually is — Damian Cross does not lose. Not to journalists, not to investigators, not to the eleven federal agencies that have quietly looked into this company over the years and found nothing they could make stick. Whatever you think you're

building against him, I'd think very carefully about what it might cost the people you care about before you finish building it."

Bentley studied the man for a long moment — the careful phrasing, the deniable framing, the same architecture of threat-without-threat his employer had just demonstrated moments earlier. "Is that concern for my welfare, Mr. Vane, or an instruction?"

"With this company," Vane said quietly, already turning to follow his employer back into the glittering crowd, "I've learned there's rarely much difference between the two."

"Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."

— James 4:7



Sarah found Bentley near the ballroom's tall windows twenty minutes later, two glasses of water in hand rather than champagne, and studied his face with the particular sharpness of a woman who had learned, over eleven years, to read him more accurately than he usually wanted to be read.

"You look like you saw something you weren't prepared for," she said.

"He mentioned Rachel," Bentley said quietly. "By name, in everything but the word itself. The rain. The interview she never came home from. A case that was never fully resolved. He knew all of it, Sarah, delivered casually enough to look like sympathy, specific enough to make certain I understood he could have said far more if he'd wanted to."

Sarah's expression hardened. "That's not a coincidence, and it's not casual research either. That's a man showing you the depth of a file he's kept on you personally, probably for years, long before Emily Carter ever became a story that mattered to him."

"I know." Bentley looked out at the city skyline beyond the glass, the same view Cross Tower's own lobby had offered three days earlier, the whole of Ashford Falls laid out beneath a man who apparently believed watching it closely enough was the same thing as loving it. "I came

here tonight hoping to find evidence. Instead I found the man himself, and I understand now why Victoria was so worried about the difference between a liar and someone who's convinced himself his cruelty is a kindness. He's not hiding what he is, Sarah. He's simply confident that nothing I find will ever be enough to stop him."

*"For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have
a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."*

— 2 Corinthians 5:1



Bentley added a single new entry to the Cross Investigation folder that night, later than usual, the ballroom's chandelier light still faintly ringing in his ears the way certain rooms lingered long after a person had left them.

First direct contact — Damian Cross, in person, Ashford Grand Hotel gala. Subject demonstrates detailed private knowledge of investigator's personal history (R. Blackwood case), delivered as implicit warning rather than direct threat. Subject's philosophy, stated directly: control as a form of protection, freedom as an acceptable cost only when convenient to those who possess it. Subject shows no observable guilt or concealment regarding Carter matter — behavior consistent with genuine belief in own righteousness rather than conscious villainy. Vane reiterates threat pattern established at Cross Tower, references "eleven federal agencies" unable to make anything stick — suggests extensive prior investigation history worth pursuing.

He closed the folder and sat for a long while in the quiet of his office, thinking not of evidence, for once, but of the particular stillness in Damian Cross's pale eyes when Bentley had told him he wasn't performing — the brief, involuntary flicker of a man recalculating an opponent he had not expected to meet. It was not proof. It was not anything Bentley could enter into a case file or present to a judge. But it was, he thought, turning the pocket watch over once in his hand before setting it down for the night, the first honest crack he had found in Damian

Cross's carefully constructed peace — and cracks, in Bentley's considerable experience, had a way of widening once someone patient enough started pressing on them.

"There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— Luke 12:2

CHAPTER TEN

Watching the Watchers

"Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?"

— Psalm 139:7

The first sign was small enough that Bentley almost dismissed it, and he would spend the following days uncomfortably aware of how close he had come to doing exactly that. Two mornings after the gala, walking the four blocks from his apartment stairwell to the small coffee shop on the corner where he bought the same black coffee he had bought most mornings for the last five years, he noticed a gray sedan parked across from the shop that he did not recognize, and inside it, motionless behind the wheel, a man who did not appear to be doing anything at all — not reading, not on a phone, not eating breakfast, simply sitting, watching the street with the particular stillness of a man whose entire job was to be unremarkable.

Bentley did not react. He bought his coffee, walked back the way he had come, and noted, without turning his head, that the sedan remained exactly where it had been when he passed it a second time.

He returned to it on foot twenty minutes later, coffee finished, deliberately approaching from an angle the driver would not have anticipated. The man behind the wheel did not startle when Bentley rapped two knuckles against the passenger window, which told Bentley, before a

single word passed between them, exactly how professional the operation was. The window lowered halfway.

"Long shift," Bentley said mildly.

"Waiting on someone," the driver said, his tone perfectly level, perfectly unbothered, the eyes behind his sunglasses giving away nothing at all.

"I'd guess you've been waiting on them for about forty minutes now, in this exact spot, on this exact street, two days running." Bentley kept his own voice equally level, matching the man's composure with his own, refusing to give him the satisfaction of visible anger. "Tell whoever sent you that I noticed. And tell them I'd rather they saved the gas money and simply called my office if they'd like to talk."

The driver said nothing. The window rose, unhurried, and the sedan pulled away from the curb a full three minutes later, at a pace that made clear the departure was a choice rather than a retreat.

"In God have I put my trust: I will not be afraid what man can do unto me."

— Psalm 56:11



"You're sure it wasn't just a guy waiting for someone," Sarah said, when he described it back at the office, though her tone made clear she was testing the theory rather than believing it.

"I've spent nine years learning to tell the difference between a man waiting for someone and a man watching something," Bentley said. "This was watching. And it wasn't the first thing out of place this week. My mail's arrived opened twice in the last five days — resealed carefully, but not carefully enough. My car's rearview mirror was angled two degrees off where I always leave it, the day after the gala. Small things. The kind of things a person only notices if they've spent a career training themselves to notice small things."

Victoria looked up from her notes, her expression sharpening into the particular focus she reserved for behavioral patterns she recognized immediately. "That's not surveillance meant to stay hidden, Bentley. If Cross Global wanted to watch you covertly, they have the resources to do it without you ever noticing a single detail out of place — we've already seen what their erasure technology can do, what their access systems can do. Leaving small, deniable traces that a trained investigator would eventually catch isn't sloppy work. It's a message."

"What kind of message?"

"The kind meant to be felt rather than proven," Victoria said. "Cross told you at the gala he doesn't get many opponents worth watching closely. I think he meant that literally, and I think this is what it looks like when a man like Damian Cross decides to watch you closely enough that you know you're being watched, but never closely enough that you can point to a single piece of evidence and take it to a court."

"The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly."

— **Proverbs 26:22**



Mason swept the office that afternoon with equipment Bentley had never seen him use before — a handheld RF detector, a small thermal camera he ran slowly along every wall and ceiling panel, a laptop running software that Bentley didn't fully understand and Mason didn't fully explain. He found nothing in the main office, which surprised Bentley less than it seemed to surprise Mason, and then, at Bentley's suggestion, he drove with Sarah to Bentley's apartment above the agency and swept that instead.

He found it behind the smoke detector in the bedroom — a device no larger than a coin, professionally installed, its casing matched precisely to the detector's own plastic housing in a

way that would have made it invisible to anyone not specifically looking for exactly what Mason had been trained to look for.

"High-end," Mason said quietly, turning the small device over in a gloved hand. "Not commercial spy shop stuff. This is the kind of hardware that costs more than most people's cars, the kind of thing you'd expect to find in a diplomatic security sweep, not a private investigator's bedroom. Audio and video both, transmitting on a frequency I've never had to hunt for before. Whoever installed this either had a key to your apartment, or didn't need one."

Bentley stood very still in his own bedroom, looking at the small device resting in Mason's palm, and felt something shift in his understanding of the last week — not fear, exactly, though something adjacent to it moved through him, but a clarifying, cold recalibration of exactly how thoroughly his privacy had already been dismantled without his knowledge.

"But there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— **Luke 12:2**



"How long has it been there?" Sarah asked.

"Hard to say exactly, but the dust pattern around the housing suggests at least a couple weeks," Mason said. "Which means whoever put this here did it before the gala. Before Cross Global even knew Bentley's name attached to this case in any official capacity. Which means either they identified him as a threat the moment he first visited Emily's apartment, or—"

"Or they've had eyes on this address longer than that, for reasons that have nothing to do with the Carter case at all," Bentley finished quietly.

The three of them stood with that thought for a long moment, none of them saying the word that had settled into the room alongside it — Rachel — though Bentley suspected each of them was thinking it, turning over the same unsettling possibility that Damian Cross's reach into

Bentley's private life might extend backward, not just forward, into a mountain road and an accident report that had never fully made sense.

"We're keeping the device active," Bentley said finally, "and feeding it nothing useful. If they want to watch me sleep and eat cereal, let them. But I want a second sweep of the car, the office again with fresh equipment, and I want Frank and Grace's home checked too, quietly, without alarming them more than necessary."

*"There is no darkness, nor shadow of death, where the workers of iniquity may
hide themselves."*

— Job 34:22



Sarah drove out to Millbrook the following morning with Mason's equipment in the trunk, framing the visit to Frank and Grace as a routine security precaution rather than the urgent response it actually was. She found nothing inside the house itself, which brought a measure of relief that lasted exactly until Mason, running his detector along the exterior phone line junction box mounted at the corner of the property, found a small inline listening device clipped directly onto the line — cruder than the one from Bentley's apartment, easier to detect, but functional all the same.

Frank stood in his own driveway holding the small device in his palm, turning it over with the same controlled fury Bentley had seen in him the night Calloway was shot. "Twenty-six years I carried a badge in this state," he said quietly. "I never once had my own phone tapped by the people I was supposed to be protecting the public from. Now a private company does it inside a week, and there's not one thing I can do about it through any legal channel that actually works."

"There's one thing you can do," Sarah said. "You can keep trusting the people trying to bring them down through channels that do work, slowly as it feels right now. Bentley hasn't

stopped once since he took this case, Mr. Carter. He's not going to start because somebody clipped a device onto your phone line."

Grace, standing beside her husband, looked at the small device in his hand and then out toward the quiet street beyond their property line, her expression settling into something steadier than fear. "Let them listen," she said finally. "Let them hear every prayer I say for my daughter, every night, for as long as it takes. I've got nothing to hide from anyone, least of all from people who've already proven they're afraid of the truth."



The strange vehicles multiplied over the following two days — never the same car twice, Bentley noted, which told him whoever was running the operation had access to a substantial rotating fleet, another detail he added, grimly, to his growing mental file on the sheer scale of resources arrayed against him. A dark blue sedan outside the office on Tuesday. A delivery van parked for six hours on Larkspur Street with no deliveries ever made from it, its driver visible through the windshield for exactly as long as it took Bentley to notice him and no longer, the van gone by the time Bentley returned from lunch. A motorcyclist who appeared twice at intersections Bentley had turned through only moments before, always at a distance that suggested tracking rather than coincidence.

He tested it deliberately on Wednesday afternoon, taking a deliberately erratic route back from a supply errand — three unnecessary turns, a stop at a store he had no reason to visit, a doubling back down a one-way alley that no casual follower would have anticipated — and confirmed, with the cold satisfaction of a hypothesis proven correct, that the same gray sedan from Monday morning reappeared behind him twice more before he made it back to Larkspur Street.

"They're not even trying that hard to hide it anymore," he told Sarah afterward. "Which tells me Victoria's right. This isn't about information at this point. They already have more information about me than I'm comfortable with. This is about pressure."

"Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear."

— Psalm 27:3



The anonymous message arrived Thursday morning, slipped beneath the agency's front door sometime between Mason's departure the previous night and his arrival at seven, no envelope, no postage, nothing but a single sheet of plain paper folded twice, typed rather than handwritten, deliberately untraceable in every respect Bentley's practiced eye could identify.

Some doors, once opened, cannot be closed again for everyone standing near them. Consider carefully who you're willing to let walk through this one beside you.

Bentley read it three times before he set it down, and it was not the words themselves that unsettled him most — vague enough to be legally meaningless, carefully constructed to avoid anything a prosecutor could ever call an explicit threat — but the specific phrasing of its final clause. Who you're willing to let walk through this one beside you. Not a threat aimed at Bentley alone. A threat aimed, deliberately and unmistakably, at everyone standing close enough to him to be caught in whatever came next.

"They're not threatening you," Victoria said quietly, reading it over his shoulder. "Or rather, they are, but that's not the primary target. This is aimed at us. At Sarah, Mason, me. At the Carters. It's designed to make you start questioning whether continuing this investigation is worth what it might cost the people around you, not what it might cost you personally. That's a considerably more sophisticated threat than a bullet through a kitchen window, Bentley, and I want you to understand that before you decide how to respond to it."

*"Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will
strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee."*

— Isaiah 41:10



Bentley called the team together that afternoon — Sarah, Mason, and Victoria seated around the central table, the anonymous note sealed now in an evidence bag beside the small transmitting device Mason had pulled from behind the smoke detector, the growing weight of the last week settled visibly over all four of them.

"I want to say this plainly, because I think you all deserve to hear it plainly rather than have me dance around it," Bentley said. "This note is right about one thing. Continuing this investigation puts every one of you at risk, more than it did a week ago, considerably more than it did when Frank and Grace Carter first walked through that door. I won't think less of anyone who decides the cost has grown too high. I mean that."

Mason didn't hesitate. "I've got a foster care record and eight months in a juvenile facility because I once decided some truths were worth the risk of going after them, even when nobody with power wanted me to. I'm not walking away from this one because a coward slid an anonymous note under a door instead of saying it to my face."

"I left the Bureau's regular caseload for this, Bentley," Sarah said. "Not because I didn't understand the risk. Because I did, and I decided it mattered more than my own safety. That hasn't changed because somebody's decided to remind me they know where I sleep."

Victoria was quieter, but no less certain. "I've spent eleven years studying men exactly like Damian Cross, and I've learned one consistent truth about them: they escalate pressure precisely because pressure has always worked before. If we back away now, we confirm every assumption he's built his entire strategy around — that fear is a reliable lever on anyone standing in his way. I'd rather prove him wrong than prove him right."

"If God be for us, who can be against us?"

— **Romans 8:31**



Bentley looked around the table at the three people who had, in the space of a single difficult week, chosen to stay rather than step back, and felt something he had not expected to feel amid the mounting danger — not relief exactly, but its close relation, the particular steadiness of a man who had spent six years insisting he could carry every burden alone and was only now beginning to understand what it cost him to keep insisting on it.

"Then we don't slow down," he said. "We get smarter. Mason, I want counter-surveillance sweeps on this office daily from now on, and I want everyone's personal vehicles checked weekly. Sarah, I want a secure line established with Frank and Grace, and I want their house checked the way we checked mine. Victoria, keep building the profile — if pressure is the strategy, I want to understand exactly how far Cross is willing to escalate it before he considers it counterproductive to his own interests. And all of us start operating on the assumption, from this point forward, that every phone call, every meeting, every piece of paper in this building might already be compromised."

Mason leaned forward, something calculating already moving behind his eyes. "There's another angle worth considering. If they're rotating a fleet of vehicles and running professional-grade surveillance hardware, that's not free. That's a budget line item somewhere, probably routed through the same tangle of shell entities we already traced from Meridian back to Cross Global. Give me time, and I might be able to find the invoice for whatever firm they've contracted to watch us — the same way we found the invoice for whoever bought the company that controlled that parking garage door."

"Do it," Bentley said. "Quietly. I don't want them to know we're aware enough to go looking for their own paper trail."

"And the note?" Sarah asked. "The car outside your apartment? Do we confront it, or let it keep running?"

Bentley considered the question, turning the pocket watch over once in his hand, thinking of Damian Cross's pale, still eyes across a gala ballroom, of a man who had built an empire on the conviction that watching people closely enough was the same thing as controlling them. "We

let it run," he said finally. "For now. A man who thinks he's successfully intimidating me is a man who stops innovating, stops escalating, settles into a pattern he believes is working. Patterns are traceable. Patterns are exactly what Mason's best at finding. I'd rather know exactly how Damian Cross watches the world than spend our resources trying to make him stop watching me specifically."

"The LORD is on my side; I will not fear: what can man do unto me?"

— Psalm 118:6



That night, alone in his apartment with the small transmitting device left carefully in place behind the smoke detector, deactivated of any usefulness now that its presence was known but left visible enough to remind him constantly of exactly how thin the walls of his own privacy had become, Bentley sat on the edge of his bed and, for the first time in longer than he could easily calculate, opened the small leather Bible his mother had given him decades earlier.

He did not open it to any particular passage. He simply let it fall open where its spine, softened by disuse rather than repeated reading, happened to release it, and found himself looking at the beginning of a psalm he had not read since seminary-adjacent Sunday mornings of his childhood, long before Rachel, long before the Bureau, long before a mountain road had rewritten the shape of everything he believed he understood about the world.

*"O LORD, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting
and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off."*

— Psalm 139:1

He read further, slower than he read anything else in his professional life, turning each line over the way he turned over evidence, testing it not for admissibility but for something he did not yet have a name for.

*"If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;
even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me."*

— **Psalm 139:9**

There was something almost unbearably strange, he thought, sitting in an apartment he now knew had been watched for weeks by men who wanted him to feel small and exposed and alone, in reading a poem written three thousand years earlier that described exactly that experience — the total, inescapable visibility of a life laid open before another's gaze — and framed it not as violation, but as comfort. Damian Cross wanted him to feel that being watched meant being controlled, being owned, being reduced to something smaller than he had been before the watching started. And here, in a book Bentley had spent six years refusing to open, was an ancient voice insisting that being fully seen, by the right set of eyes, was instead the deepest possible form of safety a person could ever be offered.

He thought of Pastor Grant's words from three days earlier — a detective searches for evidence, a believer searches for meaning — and understood, for the first time with any real clarity, that the two searches might not run in opposite directions after all. His evidence told him he was being watched by men who wanted him afraid. This ancient poem, older than the company that employed those men by three thousand years, told him that being watched had never been the threat it was being sold to him as tonight — that the discomfort he felt wasn't proof of danger so much as proof that he'd spent six years building his entire identity around never letting anyone, not even God, see him fully enough to be known.

He thought of Rachel, too, in a way he allowed himself less and less often as the years passed — not the grief of her absence, which never fully left him, but the particular quality of her own faith, steady and unhurried, that had never once needed proof to sustain it. She had read this exact psalm to him once, early in their marriage, on a night when his work had left him rattled by a case he couldn't solve, and she had told him then that she found comfort in the idea that no darkness he ever walked into would be dark to the eyes that mattered most. He had smiled at her

that night, and privately filed the sentiment away as lovely but unproven, the same way he filed away every claim he could not personally verify.

He was less certain, tonight, that unproven and untrue were the same category of thing.

He closed the Bible, but did not put it away.

"There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— Luke 12:2

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Into the Lion's Den

"For by thee I have run through a troop; and by my God have I leaped over a wall."

— Psalm 18:29

Mason found the invoice four days after Bentley told him to go looking for one, buried inside a procurement system belonging to a shell entity two layers removed from Cross Global's own name, a contract for "specialized personnel monitoring services" paid monthly to a private security contractor Bentley had never heard of. The invoice itself told him little. The delivery address printed at its header told him considerably more — a facility thirty minutes outside Ashford Falls, registered to a company called Meridian Applied Research, occupying a low, unmarked complex behind a chain-link perimeter in an industrial park that, according to public records, had been quietly purchased by a Cross Global subsidiary six years earlier.

"Public filings call it a materials testing lab," Mason said, turning his monitor around to display a satellite image of the complex — three long buildings, a parking structure, a perimeter fence with visible camera coverage at regular intervals. "But the power draw doesn't match

materials testing. I pulled utility records going back two years. That facility uses more electricity than a mid-size data center, Bentley. Whatever they're testing in there, it isn't concrete samples."

"He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty."

— Psalm 91:1



"You're not seriously considering breaking into a Cross Global facility," Victoria said, when Bentley laid out the possibility that evening, though her tone carried less surprise than the words themselves suggested. "After everything we've established about their surveillance capability, their security culture, their willingness to use lethal force against a maintenance worker who saw too much? That's not caution, Bentley. That's walking directly into the one place they're best equipped to catch you."

"It's also the one place most likely to contain evidence a court could actually use," Bentley said. "Everything we have so far is circumstantial — financial trails, a witness's testimony, an audio fragment, a threatening note nobody could trace. It's enough to convince the people in this room. It isn't enough to convince a judge to issue a warrant against a company with Cross Global's legal resources, and it certainly isn't enough to force Delgado's captain to reopen an investigation he's been paid to bury. I need something direct. Something that can't be explained away as coincidence or corporate ambiguity."

Sarah, who had been quiet through most of the discussion, spoke with the particular flatness of a woman who had already made up her mind before the conversation started. "I'm coming with you. Don't bother arguing the point, Bentley, I watched you try to talk me out of things for eleven years and it's never once worked."

"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."

— Deuteronomy 31:6



They spent three days preparing, and Bentley found himself, more than once during those days, grateful for the particular combination of skills the small agency had assembled almost by accident over the preceding two years. Mason spent two full nights mapping the facility's security architecture from the outside — camera placements identified through careful analysis of publicly available satellite imagery cross-referenced with utility permit filings that had, buried in their fine print, listed the model numbers of security equipment installed during the building's renovation. Victoria built a shift-pattern profile from nothing more than patient observation, sitting in a rented sedan a quarter mile from the facility's entrance for six hours across two separate nights, timing guard rotations with a stopwatch and a notebook until she could predict, with reasonable confidence, the eleven-minute window during which the facility's rear perimeter carried its lightest coverage.

"Tuesday night, between one-forty and one-fifty-one," Victoria said, laying the timeline across the central table. "Shift change at the guard station, plus a routine interior patrol sweep that pulls two of the three roaming guards toward the east wing during that window. It's not a large gap, and I can't promise it holds exactly to the minute every time. But it's the best opportunity this facility offers in any given week."

Mason had, in the meantime, built something he referred to only as "the loop" — a small device capable of intercepting and replacing the video feed from a specific camera with several seconds of pre-recorded, looping footage, invisible to anyone monitoring the feed casually rather than frame by frame. "I can get you two cameras, maybe three if I'm fast," he said. "That's the rear perimeter fence and the loading dock door Victoria identified as the facility's weakest

physical access point. Everything past that door, I can't help you with in real time. You're on your own once you're inside."

"What happens if it fails," Bentley asked, "mid-operation?"

"Then a live guard sees a live feed of two people who shouldn't be there, and I've got no way to fix that from a laptop three miles away." Mason didn't soften the answer, which Bentley respected more than he would have respected false reassurance. "I've tested this loop technique twice before on lower-stakes jobs and it held both times. I can't promise you a third success. I can promise you I'll be watching every second of this, and the moment anything looks wrong, you'll hear about it in my voice before you'd ever see it with your own eyes."

Victoria spent the final evening before the operation walking Bentley and Sarah through the facility's likely internal culture, drawing on everything she had observed at Cross Tower and everything the recovered financial documents suggested about the company's compartmentalized structure. "Assume every employee inside that building, if you encounter one, has been trained the same way the coffee-tray woman in the lobby was trained — controlled, careful, quick to report anything unusual. Don't assume anyone will hesitate to raise an alarm out of sympathy or confusion. This isn't a company that hires people prone to hesitation."

"Understood," Sarah said.

"One more thing." Victoria's voice softened, just slightly, the clinical precision she usually maintained giving way to something more personal. "I've read a great deal about men like Damian Cross over the years, and I've learned that the ones who build cultures this controlled almost always overestimate how thoroughly that control extends. They stop imagining that anyone could move through their world without being caught, because everyone around them has been trained never to try. That overconfidence is your best asset tomorrow night. Use it."

"Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart:

wait, I say, on the LORD."

— Psalm 27:14

"Commit thy way unto the LORD; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass."

— Psalm 37:5



They went in Tuesday night, dressed in dark clothing that drew no attention and explained nothing if seen, Bentley carrying a small case of tools he had not used since his Bureau years and had hoped, at the time, never to need again. The rain that had followed this investigation since its very first hour returned that night as well, a fine, cold mist that muffled sound and reduced visibility in exactly the ways that made Bentley's work both easier and more dangerous at once.

They cleared the perimeter fence at 1:42, Mason's looped footage holding steady on the earpiece feed Bentley wore beneath his collar. The loading dock door yielded to a lock Bentley had defeated in under ninety seconds, a skill he had not lost in the years since leaving the Bureau, and the two of them slipped into the facility's interior with the particular controlled quiet of two people who had each, at different points in their careers, been trained extensively in exactly this kind of movement.

The interior told a different story than the building's plain exterior had suggested. Beyond the loading dock's utilitarian concrete, the facility opened into corridors of the same white, sterile design Bentley had seen at Cross Tower — the same careful, deliberate architecture built to project competence and control. Signage directed traffic toward labs Bentley had no time to investigate: MATERIALS TESTING, one read, plausibly enough. BEHAVIORAL RESPONSE ANALYSIS, read another, considerably less plausibly for a company that publicly described itself as a technology and infrastructure firm.

"For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD... to give you an expected end."

— **Jeremiah 29:11**



"Server room, north wing," Sarah murmured, checking the facility map Mason had reconstructed from building permit filings. "That's our best chance at anything documentary. Everything else in here is probably just hardware."

They moved through the corridors with eleven minutes counting down in Bentley's earpiece, past darkened offices and a break room with a coffee machine still faintly warm, until they reached a heavy door marked with a keycard reader Mason had warned them, in advance, he could not defeat remotely. Bentley worked the lock manually instead, a slower, more deliberate process than the loading dock's simpler mechanism, sweat beading at his temple despite the building's cool, filtered air, until the mechanism finally yielded with a soft click that felt, in the tension of the moment, considerably louder than it actually was.

What they found inside stopped both of them cold for a moment neither of them could afford to spend.

Rows of server racks lined the room's interior, their status lights blinking in patient, silent rhythm, but it was the wall-mounted display screens above the workstations that held Bentley's attention — a dozen live camera feeds, cycling continuously, showing not the facility's own interior but ordinary streets, ordinary storefronts, ordinary apartment building lobbies across what Bentley recognized, with a growing cold certainty, as at least four different neighborhoods in Ashford Falls that had nothing to do with Cross Global's public "ambient safety" contracts with the city.

"There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."



"This isn't city infrastructure," Sarah said quietly, moving along the workstation row, photographing screens as quickly as her phone would allow. "Look at the labeling. These aren't municipal camera designations. These are private residential buildings, Bentley — apartment complexes, at least two schools, what looks like a hospital waiting room. This is a surveillance network Cross Global built without any public contract authorizing it, watching ordinary citizens who have no idea they're being monitored at all."

Bentley moved to the nearest workstation, careful not to touch the keyboard directly, photographing instead the printed documentation stacked beside it — internal reports stamped PROJECT SENTINEL, dense with technical specifications Bentley didn't have time to fully parse, but understood enough, from headers and summary paragraphs, to recognize as a pilot program for exactly the kind of comprehensive, unauthorized civilian monitoring network Emily Carter's article had accused Cross Global of building.

"Get the physical documents," Sarah said. "Photos can be dismissed as fabricated. Paper's harder to explain away."

Bentley slid a folder's contents into the flat interior pocket of his jacket, careful to leave the folder itself undisturbed on the desk, and had just reached for a second document — a summary page listing what appeared to be pilot deployment locations, Sycamore Street among them, four blocks from Emily Carter's own apartment — when the earpiece crackled with Mason's voice, tight with sudden urgency.

"Guys, I've got a problem. Interior patrol's off pattern. They're heading your direction, and they're moving fast."

*"The LORD is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble; and he knoweth them
that trust in him."*



"How long," Bentley said, already moving toward the door, the documents secured against his chest.

"Ninety seconds, maybe less. I don't know why they broke pattern, but they're not doing a routine sweep anymore. Somebody triggered something."

Sarah was already at the door, listening, her hand raised for silence, and in the corridor beyond, faint but unmistakable, the sound of boots on polished concrete, moving with purpose rather than the leisurely pace of routine patrol.

"Not the way we came in," she breathed. "They're between us and the loading dock."

Bentley risked a glance back through the narrow window set into the server room door and felt his pulse spike at what he saw — two guards already at the far end of the corridor, moving fast, flashlights sweeping in disciplined arcs, a third voice audible now over a radio somewhere closer than either of the first two. Whatever had triggered this response, it was not a routine sweep. Someone, somewhere, had noticed something specific enough to mobilize the entire interior team at once.

Bentley's mind raced through the facility map Mason had reconstructed, the memorized layout of corridors and access points, and settled on a service stairwell marked on the plans two doors down, unmentioned in Victoria's surveillance profile because it had shown no camera coverage worth tracking, which meant it had also shown no data on where it actually led. It was, he understood immediately, a calculated risk rather than a certainty — but the alternative was a confrontation neither of them could win against a facility full of trained security in a building they did not control.

"Stairwell," he said. "Now."

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

— Psalm 46:1



They made it four steps into the corridor before a voice behind them, amplified and sharp, cut through the quiet. "Facility's secure — I need eyes on the north wing server room, now." Footsteps accelerated. A door somewhere behind them slammed open.

Bentley did not look back. He and Sarah moved together with the fluid, silent coordination of two people who had trained for exactly this kind of pressure years before either of them had ever heard of Cross Global Technologies, reaching the service stairwell and descending two flights at a pace just short of a dangerous run, emerging into a narrow maintenance corridor that Bentley recognized, with a surge of relief he did not allow himself to fully feel yet, as running parallel to the loading dock they'd entered through.

"Mason, I need that loop back on the dock camera, now," Bentley said into the earpiece, his breath controlled despite his racing pulse.

"Already on it. You've got maybe forty seconds before the whole interior team converges on that server room and somebody notices the door's been forced."

They reached the loading dock at a controlled sprint, and Bentley felt, for one suspended half-second as he worked the door's mechanism in reverse, the particular clarity that came only in genuine danger — a narrowing of the entire world down to the single task in front of him, every other thought, every other fear, every ache of the last two weeks compressed into the simple, physical necessity of getting the door open before the footsteps behind them closed the distance.

"We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed."

— 2 Corinthians 4:8



The door gave. Cold night air and rain met them as they slipped through, and they were across the loading dock's exterior apron and into the tree line beyond the perimeter fence within seconds, moving now not with stealth but with the flat, urgent speed of two people who understood exactly how little time remained before the facility's full security response organized itself.

A voice shouted somewhere behind them — not close, not yet, but closing — and Bentley recognized, even through the rain and the distance, a cadence in it that made his stomach tighten with a recognition he didn't have time to fully process. Marcus Vane. Called in personally, apparently, the moment the north wing's breach registered, which told Bentley, even in the middle of their flight, exactly how seriously Cross Global regarded whatever had just been photographed inside that server room.

"Perimeter fence, thirty yards," Sarah said, breathing hard beside him, and Bentley pushed himself faster, the flat case of stolen documents pressed tight against his chest beneath his jacket, rain stinging his eyes, the chain-link fence rising out of the darkness ahead exactly where Victoria's reconnaissance had promised it would be. A beam of light swept across the tree line behind them, closer now than Bentley wanted to acknowledge, and he heard Vane's voice again, sharper this time, no longer distant.

"They're not getting off this property. Seal it."

Bentley reached the fence a half-second ahead of Sarah, boosting her over the section Mason's earlier reconnaissance had identified as unmonitored by any working camera, then following in a single controlled motion that cost him a torn sleeve and a shallow scrape along his forearm he wouldn't fully register until they were back in the car. They dropped into the wet grass on the far side and kept moving, not toward the road directly but along the tree line paralleling it, exactly as they'd planned in the event of a compromised exit, until the facility's lights and shouting voices faded behind them into the steady white noise of the rain.

They reached the car half a mile down the access road, engine running before either door had fully closed, and Sarah pulled away from the facility at a controlled, unhurried pace that Bentley understood, even through his own racing heartbeat, was deliberately calculated not to draw the attention a screeching, panicked departure would have guaranteed.

Neither of them spoke for the first several minutes, the only sound the rhythmic sweep of the wipers and their own breathing gradually slowing from the sprint. It was Sarah who finally broke the silence, her voice unsteady in a way Bentley had rarely heard from her.

"We got it," she said. "Bentley, we actually got it."

"I sought the LORD, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears."

— Psalm 34:4



Back at Larkspur Street, the documents spread across the central table under the office's bright overhead lights, the full scope of what they'd recovered became clear in a way the rushed, adrenaline-soaked minutes inside the facility hadn't allowed. Project Sentinel, the internal reports confirmed, had been operating for over eighteen months — a pilot surveillance network covering eleven neighborhoods across Ashford Falls, none of them authorized by any public contract, all of them justified internally, according to one particularly damning executive summary, as "necessary infrastructure validation ahead of full-scale ambient safety deployment."

And on the deployment map Bentley had photographed before their escape, among the eleven pilot zones, one entry stood out with a clarity that made the whole night's danger feel, suddenly, entirely worth it: Sycamore Street corridor — Priority Zone 3 — installed fourteen months prior to E. Carter's relocation to the address.

"They were watching that street before Emily ever moved there," Victoria said quietly, studying the map. "This wasn't reactive surveillance triggered by her investigation, Bentley. This is proof the network existed first, and her apartment simply happened to fall inside a zone they'd

already built. Which means when she started investigating them, they didn't need to install anything new to watch her disappear. They already had eyes on her front door the entire time she lived there."

Bentley looked at the documents spread across the table — evidence, finally, of the exact scale of what Emily Carter had risked everything to expose, evidence a court could not dismiss as coincidence or speculation — and felt the particular, sober satisfaction of a man who had walked into genuine danger and walked back out carrying something that mattered, one step closer to bringing a missing woman home.

"Add it to the file," he said quietly. "All of it."

"There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— Luke 12:2

CHAPTER TWELVE

Emily's Secret Journal

"The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun."

— Ecclesiastes 1:9

Victoria finished decoding Emily Carter's notebook on the ninth day of the investigation, working through the final pages in the quiet hours after midnight while the rest of the office slept or pretended to, and she called Bentley at two in the morning with a voice that told him, before she said a single word about its contents, that what she had found was no longer simply a notebook.

"It's a journal, Bentley," she said. "Not just notes for a story. She was writing to someone. Herself, God, whoever might eventually read it — I'm not entirely sure which, and I think she might not have been entirely sure either. But you need to see this in the morning. All of it. I don't think either of us should be alone with it tonight."

"Shall not God search this out? for he knoweth the secrets of the heart."

— Psalm 44:21



They gathered around the central table at eight the next morning, Victoria's careful transcription spread across dozens of pages now, Emily Carter's private shorthand rendered finally into plain, readable English after nine days of patient work. Bentley read the earliest entries first, dated nearly eight months before Emily's disappearance, in handwriting — even translated — that carried the particular energy of a woman who had just stumbled onto something she didn't yet understand the size of.

Rodriguez called again today. Says he can't sleep. Says he helped build something he doesn't have words for yet, something bigger than facial recognition, bigger than tracking. He keeps calling it "The Eye" — not Cross Global's name for it, his own name, the one that stuck in his head the first night he understood what he'd actually been hired to do. I asked him what made it different from everything else this industry already builds. He went quiet for a long time before he answered. He said, "Emily, most of what we build watches you when you're somewhere. This watches you everywhere, all the time, and it never forgets, and it never stops learning what you're afraid of." I didn't sleep either, after that call.

"Rodriguez," Sarah said quietly. "The anonymous source. She never named him directly to anyone else, not even to Priya. But she named him in here, over and over."

Mason was already at his own monitor, cross-referencing the name against employment records Bentley had asked him, weeks earlier, to keep quietly building in the background. "David

Rodriguez. Senior systems architect, Cross Global's applied research division, seven years with the company. Filed for a leave of absence four months ago — right around the time these entries start getting more detailed — and never came back from it. No forwarding address on file. No new employer showing up in any database I can access."

"He's either hiding," Victoria said, "or he's already been found."

Bentley absorbed that possibility in silence, thinking of Raymond Calloway's shattered kitchen window, of a records clerk's newly financed boat, of exactly how thoroughly Cross Global had demonstrated its willingness to silence anyone who threatened to become inconvenient. "Add him to the list," he said finally. "If he's alive, I want to find him before they do. If he's not, I want to know that too, and I want it documented."

"For nothing is secret, that shall not be made manifest; neither any thing hid, that shall not be known and come abroad."

— Luke 8:17



The entries grew longer and more urgent as the months progressed, tracking Emily's investigation with the same disciplined thoroughness Bentley recognized in his own casework — dates, names, financial figures, technical specifications she'd clearly worked hard to understand well enough to explain to a general reader. But threaded through the investigative material, in a way that surprised Bentley more than he expected, were passages that had nothing to do with evidence at all.

I keep thinking about Luke twelve, two. Nothing covered that won't be revealed. I used to read that verse as comfort — the promise that truth always wins eventually, that liars can't hide forever. Lately I've started reading it differently. What if it's not just a comfort? What if it's also a responsibility? If I know something is covered, and I have the ability to help reveal it, does the verse become a command rather than just a promise? I think it might. I think that's what's been

keeping me at this story longer than any reasonable person would stay at something this frightening.

Bentley set the page down and looked up to find Victoria watching him, her expression carrying the particular gravity of a woman who had already read every word of this and understood, better than anyone else at the table, exactly what it had cost her to translate a stranger's private fear into something the rest of them could finally see.

"Keep reading," Victoria said quietly. "It gets harder before it gets clearer."

"Then said I, Here am I; send me."

— **Isaiah 6:8**



The middle section of the journal documented what Bentley recognized immediately as the true scope of what Emily had uncovered — considerably larger than even the Ashford Falls pilot network he and Sarah had photographed inside the research facility. Emily had tracked Cross Global subsidiaries and shell acquisitions across eleven states, cross-referencing public infrastructure contracts with private security firms that traced back, through the same patient layering Mason had spent weeks unraveling, to the same ultimate parent company.

This isn't a city problem. I don't think it's even a state problem anymore. Rodriguez says the pilot program here in Ashford Falls is one of six currently running nationwide, each one smaller and quieter than what they eventually want to build — a genuinely national network, marketed eventually as a public safety partnership too convenient and too well-funded for most cities to refuse once it's offered to them. He says the pitch will be simple. Crime rates fall wherever The Eye gets deployed, because criminals don't commit crimes they know they'll be caught for. Nobody in the meeting will ask what it costs everyone else to live inside a system built to watch them constantly in exchange for that safety. Nobody ever does, until it's already built, and by then it's not something you vote against anymore. It's just the water you swim in.

"Eleven states," Mason said, staring at the page like it had physically struck him. "This isn't a company doing something illegal in one city, Bentley. This is a company building the architecture for something we don't even have a legal framework to stop, because it doesn't exist as a single crime anywhere. It exists as a thousand small legal decisions that add up to something nobody ever explicitly approved."

Sarah paged further through Victoria's transcription, her expression darkening with each new entry. "She names two other journalists here. A reporter in Denver who published a smaller piece about surveillance contracts eighteen months ago and quietly left the profession entirely six weeks later, no explanation given publicly. And a city council researcher in Phoenix who raised questions about a 'public safety partnership' bid and resigned from her position less than a month afterward, citing 'personal reasons.' Emily tried to contact both of them. Neither one would speak with her, even off the record."

"Frightened into silence," Victoria said. "Or paid into it. Either way, it tells us Emily wasn't the first person to get close to this. She was simply the first one who refused to stop when the warning signs appeared."

"Or the first one Cross Global failed to fully silence in time," Bentley said quietly. "We don't know yet which one she is. That's precisely what we're going to find out."

"While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption."

— 2 Peter 2:19



Bentley found the entry that changed the shape of the morning entirely nearly two-thirds of the way through the journal, dated roughly ten weeks before Emily's disappearance, written in the particular controlled, careful handwriting Victoria had noted marked Emily's most frightened entries.

Rodriguez told me something today that I haven't been able to stop thinking about. He said The Eye isn't new — not really. He said the current version, the one running in Ashford Falls and five other cities, is the third generation of something Cross Global has been quietly refining for almost seven years. He said the first version was small, experimental, deployed in a handful of test locations before anyone called it The Eye at all. And he said that in its earliest form, before it had the safeguards and the legal cover it has now, it made mistakes. He wouldn't tell me what kind of mistakes. He just said, "People who got too close to finding out about it back then didn't always stay safe, Emily, and I don't think that's changed as much as this company wants everyone to believe."

The room went very quiet. Bentley read the passage a second time, and then a third, feeling something cold and precise settle into place beneath his ribs — not proof, nothing he could enter into a case file, nothing with a name or a date attached to it. But a shape, unmistakable even in its vagueness, of exactly the kind of danger that had swallowed a mountain road six years earlier and left behind nothing but an accident report that told him everything and explained nothing.

"Bentley." Sarah's voice was careful, gentle in a way she rarely allowed herself to be. "That's seven years ago. That's before Rachel."

"I know," Bentley said quietly.

"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."

— Romans 8:18



"It's not proof of anything," Victoria said, carefully, watching Bentley's face with the particular caution of a woman managing a moment she understood could unravel a man who had spent six years holding himself together through sheer discipline alone. "I want to be honest with

you, because I think you deserve honesty more than comfort right now. Emily's journal describes an unnamed pattern, secondhand, from a frightened source who himself was speculating about a company's early history. It isn't a confession. It isn't a name. It isn't anything I would call evidence in any sense that would hold up to real scrutiny."

"I know that too," Bentley said, and found, to his own quiet surprise, that his voice remained steady even as something inside him had not stopped shaking since he'd read the passage the first time. "I've spent nine years teaching myself not to build conclusions on coincidence, Victoria. I'm not building one now. But I'm also not going to pretend this doesn't matter, or that it doesn't deserve to be followed exactly as seriously as every other lead in this case."

He stood, crossed to the locked bottom drawer of his own desk, and returned with Rachel's incident file, setting it beside Emily's translated journal on the central table — two investigations, six years apart, that had never once, until this morning, shared a single page of evidence between them.

He called Pastor Grant that same afternoon, uncertain, even as he dialed, exactly what he hoped to hear back. Grant listened without interrupting as Bentley described the journal entry, the vague, secondhand reference to an early version of *The Eye* and the mistakes it had made before anyone gave it a name, and when Bentley finished, the older man was quiet for a long moment before he spoke.

"I won't pretend to know what this means for Rachel's case, Mr. Blackwood. I'd be doing you a disservice to speculate beyond what the evidence actually says, and I think you'd see through it if I tried." Grant's voice carried its usual unhurried steadiness, but something warmer moved beneath it too. "What I will say is this. You've spent six years believing an unanswered question meant an unanswerable one. This morning, for the first time, you have a thread — thin, unconfirmed, exactly as fragile as Victoria warned you it was — but a thread nonetheless. I don't think that's coincidence, whatever else it turns out to be. I think it's the kind of thing that happens when a man finally stops insisting he has to find every answer entirely alone."

"I haven't stopped insisting that," Bentley admitted. "Not entirely."

"No," Grant agreed, and Bentley could hear, even over the phone, the small, knowing warmth of a smile. "But you called me before you'd finished processing it yourself, which is more than the Bentley Blackwood I met three weeks ago would have done. That's not nothing, Mr. Blackwood. In my experience, it's usually where everything else begins."

"The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant."

— **Psalm 25:14**

"Add a line to the Cross Investigation folder," he said quietly. "Possible historical connection — early-generation surveillance program, pre-dating current Eye network by approximately seven years — unconfirmed link to R. Blackwood incident. Requires independent verification before any further weight is given to it." He paused, looking at the two files side by side, and added, more quietly, "But it gets followed. Every lead in this case gets followed, regardless of what it costs me personally to follow it."

"I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people, that have set themselves against me round about."

— **Psalm 3:6**



The journal's final entries, dated in the last two weeks before Emily's disappearance, carried a different quality than everything that preceded them — less investigative, more personal, the writing of a woman who understood, with increasing clarity, exactly how close she had come to the center of something considerably larger and more dangerous than she had ever anticipated when she'd first taken Rodriguez's call eight months earlier.

Pastor Grant came to see me last week, uninvited, which he almost never does — he usually waits for people to come to him. He said he'd had a feeling he needed to check on me. I didn't tell him everything. I told him enough. He asked if I was ready for whatever happened next, and I told him honestly that I didn't think anyone is ever fully ready for something like that, and he said that was all right, that readiness wasn't really the requirement anyway. He said the requirement was faithfulness in the moment you're actually given, not in some imagined future moment you've had time to prepare for. I've been turning that over ever since. I think I understand it a little better each day that passes without anything happening. I think I'll understand it completely the day something finally does.

I don't know if I'll get to finish this story the way I planned to finish it. I've started preparing for the possibility that I won't, which feels strange to write down plainly like this, but I'd rather be honest in these pages than pretend a courage I don't always feel. I've hidden what I need to hide. I've told Pastor Grant enough that someone will understand, eventually, why I kept going even when it would have been easier and safer to stop. I've told my parents I love them more times in the last two weeks than I probably have in the last two years combined, and I don't regret a single one of those calls, even if Dad thinks I'm being dramatic.

Here is what I know for certain, and what I want whoever eventually reads this to know too. I am afraid. I have been afraid for weeks. But I am not the kind of afraid that changes what I believe is true, or what I believe is worth doing regardless of the cost. Nothing covered stays covered forever. I believe that with everything I have left to believe things with. And I believe, whatever happens to me, that the God who sees everything I've uncovered was watching long before I ever picked up the phone the night Rodriguez first called, and that He will still be watching everything The Eye does long after I've stopped being able to write another word about it.

If you're reading this, and I'm not the one who found you first: finish it. Please. Whatever it costs.

"Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life."

— Revelation 2:10



No one spoke for a long moment after Bentley finished reading the final entry aloud. Outside, the ordinary sounds of Larkspur Street continued without any awareness of what had just been read inside the small brick office above it — traffic, distant conversation, the mundane rhythm of a city that had no idea how many of its own streets sat inside a surveillance network none of its residents had ever consented to.

"She wrote that not knowing who'd eventually read it," Sarah said finally, her voice thick. "Not knowing if it would be you, or her parents, or nobody at all. And she still wrote 'finish it' instead of 'I'm sorry' or 'please help me.' That's not the writing of a woman who thought she was already defeated, Bentley. That's the writing of a woman handing off a relay race, fully expecting somebody would eventually pick up the baton."

Bentley looked at the journal's final page, at Emily's careful, deliberate handwriting decoded now into words the whole team could finally understand, and thought of Grace Carter's voice across his desk on the very first day of this case. I don't need you to have faith. I have enough for both of us. I just need you to look. He thought of Pastor Grant's gentle insistence that faith and evidence were two instruments built to measure two different things. And he thought, for the first time since Rachel's death, that he understood — not fully, not yet, but enough to feel the shape of it — what it might mean to carry both instruments at once, rather than insisting one could replace the other.

He called Grace Carter that afternoon, uncertain how much of the journal's content to share, and found, once again, that Grace understood the decision before he'd finished making it himself.

"Read me the part where she says she's not afraid in the way that changes what she believes," Grace said quietly, once Bentley had explained what they'd found. "I don't need to hear all of it today, Mr. Blackwood. I don't think my heart could hold all of it today. But I'd like to hear that part."

He read it to her slowly, over the phone, and heard her breath catch and then steady on the other end of the line, heard Frank's voice murmur something low and comforting in the background.

"That's my girl," Grace said, when he finished, echoing almost exactly the words Frank had spoken in a hospital room over Raymond Calloway's bed two weeks earlier. "She gets that from her father, that stubborn refusal to let fear write the last word. And she gets the rest of it — the part where she trusts God can hold what she can't carry — from someplace older than either of us, I think. From every woman in this family who came before her and decided the same thing in her own hard season." A pause, and when she spoke again, her voice had steadied into something Bentley had come to recognize as entirely her own. "Finish it, Mr. Blackwood. Whatever it costs. She already told you that herself, in her own words. I don't have anything wiser to add to it."

"We're going to finish it," Bentley said quietly, closing the journal with the same careful reverence he might have shown a piece of Scripture himself. "Whatever it costs."

"There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— Luke 12:2

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Price of Truth

"Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints."

— Psalm 116:15

Mason found David Rodriguez on the eleventh day of searching, not through any database or financial trail but through the oldest and simplest method available to him — a cousin's Facebook post, three months old, tagging Rodriguez at a small cabin outside a town called Pine Ridge, four hours north of Ashford Falls, in a comment thread nobody involved had ever imagined a private investigator's associate would think to search.

"He's been living off the grid since he stopped answering Emily's calls," Mason reported, spreading a printed map across the central table. "No new employer, no new lease under his own name, cash withdrawals from an ATM in Pine Ridge going back four months. I think he's been terrified this entire time, Bentley, hiding well enough to survive but not well enough that a determined search couldn't eventually find him."

Bentley studied the map, thinking of the journal entry Rodriguez's own words had produced two days earlier — people who got too close to finding out about it back then didn't always stay safe — and felt the particular weight of responsibility that came with locating a man who had spent four months successfully avoiding exactly the kind of attention Bentley was now about to bring to his door.

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

— John 15:13



It took another three days to arrange contact, working through an intermediary — a distant relative Mason identified and Sarah approached in person, gently, with credentials and a careful explanation rather than a cold phone call that might have frightened Rodriguez into vanishing again entirely. The message that finally reached him was simple: Emily Carter's family had hired an investigator. Her notebook had been recovered and decoded. Whatever Rodriguez

knew, whatever he was carrying, might be the difference between finding her alive and never finding her at all.

He called Bentley directly two days later, his voice thin and exhausted over a burner phone Bentley suspected he had purchased with cash specifically for this single conversation.

"I've watched the news," Rodriguez said, without preamble. "I know what happened to that maintenance worker who saw them take her. I know these people don't make mistakes when they decide someone needs to disappear or die. I've spent four months telling myself Emily's disappearance had nothing to do with me, that I gave her enough to write her story and my part was finished the moment she published it. I don't believe that anymore. I haven't believed it in weeks."

"I understand your fear, Mr. Rodriguez," Bentley said carefully. "I won't pretend meeting with me carries no risk. But I think you already know that risk exists whether you speak with me or not. Silence hasn't protected the other people this company has decided to silence permanently."

A long silence stretched across the line, and when Rodriguez finally spoke again, his voice carried the particular exhausted resolve of a man who had made his decision long before he'd worked up the courage to admit it aloud. "There's a rest stop off Route 9, about halfway between here and Ashford Falls. Diner attached to it, open late, mostly truckers this time of year. Tomorrow night, eleven o'clock. I'll bring everything I have. Come alone, or bring exactly one other person you trust completely. Anyone else, and I'm gone before you get out of the car."

"The LORD also will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble."

— Psalm 9:9



Bentley and Sarah arrived at the rest stop diner at 10:40 the following night, twenty minutes early, a habit Bentley had never fully abandoned from his Bureau years — arrive first,

understand the terrain, choose the seat that faces the door rather than have the door choose it for you. The diner was exactly as Rodriguez had described it, half-empty, fluorescent-lit, the particular tired hum of a place that existed mostly for people passing through rather than people staying.

They took a booth near the back, ordered coffee neither of them intended to finish, and waited.

Eleven o'clock came and passed without Rodriguez's arrival. Bentley did not immediately worry — a frightened man running four hours on back roads had every reason to be cautious, to double back, to watch the parking lot from a distance before committing to the meeting himself. By eleven-fifteen, the coffee had gone cold in front of both of them, and Sarah's hand had drifted, without either of them commenting on it, to rest near the edge of the table close enough to reach her sidearm without appearing to.

A trucker two booths over glanced their way twice, and Bentley catalogued the man automatically, the way he catalogued everyone in a room during a tense wait — ordinary, tired, entirely uninterested in them beyond the passing curiosity of a stranger noticing two people who clearly weren't there for the diner's coffee. A waitress refilled their cups without being asked, twice, and Bentley found himself grateful for the small kindness of not having to explain why two people were sitting silently in a booth for the better part of an hour.

"He's not coming," Sarah said quietly, checking her watch for what Bentley guessed was the tenth time in twenty minutes.

"Or he's being more careful than we expected," Bentley said, though he heard, even as he said it, how little conviction the words carried. "Give him until midnight before we call this compromised."

Midnight came and went. Bentley called the burner number Rodriguez had used two nights earlier, and it rang four times before dropping into a generic voicemail greeting that told him nothing. He tried again at 11:42, and a third time at 11:58, and by the time the diner's overnight cook began stacking chairs on nearby tables in the unmistakable universal signal of a

business preparing to close, both of them understood, without needing to say it aloud, that they were no longer waiting for a meeting. They were beginning, quietly and with dread, to search for a man who had simply stopped answering.

"Something's wrong," Sarah said quietly.

"My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning."

— Psalm 130:6



They found his car twenty minutes later, on Mason's guidance, tracked through a rental agreement Rodriguez had used under his own cousin's name — parked at a scenic overlook two miles short of the rest stop, engine cold, driver's door unlocked, the interior undisturbed except for a single detail that made Bentley's stomach tighten the moment his flashlight beam crossed it: a manila envelope, sealed, resting on the passenger seat, addressed in careful handwriting to Bentley Blackwood.

Rodriguez himself lay twenty feet from the vehicle, near the overlook's guardrail, in a position that a less trained investigator might have read, at first glance, as a man who had simply lost his footing on wet gravel and struck his head against the rocks below.

Bentley knelt beside the body with the particular, practiced stillness of a man who had processed a great many scenes exactly like this one, and felt, within the first thirty seconds of his examination, the cold certainty of exactly what he was looking at.

"This wasn't an accident," he said quietly.

"The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground."

— Genesis 4:10



"Talk me through it," Sarah said, already photographing the scene from multiple angles, her own training reasserting itself over the grief neither of them had time to fully process yet.

"Bruising pattern on the forearms — defensive, not consistent with a simple fall. He fought whoever did this, at least briefly." Bentley moved his light carefully across the body, cataloguing without touching, preserving what a scene this carefully staged had likely already been compromised enough to lose. "The wound on the back of his skull doesn't match the angle of the guardrail behind him. If he'd fallen the way this is meant to look, the impact would be forward and downward. This is lateral, blunt force, delivered by something considerably harder and flatter than gravel." He paused, studying the ground near the body more carefully. "And there's no blood trail consistent with him falling here and dying here. I'd guess he was killed elsewhere, close by, and moved to this spot afterward to construct the scene we're looking at."

"They wanted it to look accidental."

"They wanted it to look accidental to anyone who wasn't looking closely," Bentley said. "Which tells me something important, Sarah. Whoever did this either didn't expect a trained investigator to be the one who found him, or didn't care, because they're confident enough in their reach that a homicide finding wouldn't actually threaten them regardless of what conclusion any investigator reached."

He crouched lower, examining the gravel near the body more carefully, and found what he was looking for a moment later — a partial tire impression in the softer earth just off the overlook's paved shoulder, distinct from the tread pattern of Rodriguez's rented sedan. "A second vehicle was here. Recently, based on how sharp this impression still is despite tonight's wind." He photographed it carefully from multiple angles before the elements could soften it further. "They followed him from wherever he was actually killed, staged the scene, and left before we ever arrived. Whoever's doing this company's darkest work is patient enough and skilled enough to know exactly how long they can afford to linger at a scene before the risk outweighs the certainty."

Sarah knelt beside the manila envelope, careful not to disturb its seal before the state police could process it properly. "He was bringing this to you regardless of the risk. He knew exactly what could happen to him tonight, Bentley, and he came anyway."

"I know," Bentley said quietly, and felt, for the first time since Rachel's death, an anger that burned cleaner and less complicated than grief — not the tangled, directionless fury he had carried for six years toward an unsolved case, but something sharper, aimed precisely at a company that had decided a frightened man's conscience was a liability to be managed rather than a life to be respected.

"Judgment is turned away backward, and justice standeth afar off: for truth is fallen in the street, and equity cannot enter."

— **Isaiah 59:14**



Bentley called the state police rather than Ashford Falls PD, a decision he made without needing to discuss it with Sarah first, both of them understanding without words that a homicide connected this directly to Cross Global could not be trusted to a department with a proven, active leak inside its own records division. The responding troopers arrived within forty minutes, and Bentley watched, with a complicated mixture of relief and continued wariness, as they treated the scene with a thoroughness Delgado's team had never once extended to Emily Carter's own case.

"You're saying this connects to an open missing persons investigation out of Ashford Falls," the lead trooper said, a serious, weathered woman named Detective Okafor who took Bentley's account with a skepticism that gradually, visibly, eroded as he laid out the pieces — Emily's disappearance, the maintenance worker's shooting, the corrupted footage, the recovered documents from Meridian Applied Research, all of it building toward a picture considerably larger than a single body beside a guardrail.

"I'm saying this is the fourth act of violence connected to this case in three weeks," Bentley said. "A witness shot in his own kitchen. Evidence professionally erased across three separate systems. A break-in at a Cross Global research facility that I'll admit to you plainly, Detective, because I'd rather you hear it from me than discover it independently — I conducted myself, alongside Ms. Whitmore, in pursuit of evidence a local department refused to gather. And now a source, murdered the night before he was scheduled to hand me physical evidence connecting Cross Global Technologies to an illegal, unauthorized surveillance network operating across eleven states."

Okafor studied him for a long moment, then looked past him at the scene, at the careful staging that had nearly succeeded, at the manila envelope now bagged and tagged as evidence in her own custody rather than Bentley's. "This just became a homicide investigation under state jurisdiction, Mr. Blackwood, which means it's out of Ashford Falls PD's hands whether their captain likes that or not. I can't promise you what that ultimately accomplishes against a company with the resources you're describing. But I can promise you it won't be buried the way you're telling me the rest of this has been."

"O ye that love the LORD, hate evil: he preserveth the souls of his saints; he delivereth them out of the hand of the wicked."

— Psalm 97:10



The envelope's contents, released to Bentley two days later once the state's forensic team had completed their own documentation, proved to be exactly what Rodriguez had promised — technical specifications for The Eye's earliest prototype systems, internal Cross Global communications discussing "acceptable exposure risk" in language that made Bentley's jaw tighten with barely controlled anger, and a final, handwritten note that Rodriguez had apparently added just before the meeting, folded separately from the rest of the material.

Mr. Blackwood — if you're reading this without me sitting across from you, then I already know what happened, and I want you to understand it was my choice to come anyway. I've spent four months hiding, and hiding kept me alive but it didn't keep me at peace. Emily used to tell me faith wasn't the absence of fear, it was deciding Someone was bigger than the thing you were afraid of. I didn't understand what she meant until I'd spent four months proving to myself that fear alone is a very small place to live. Whatever happens to me tonight, please make sure it wasn't for nothing. There are more people who know pieces of this than Cross Global realizes. Find them before they lose their nerve the way I nearly did.

"Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

— **Matthew 5:10**



Priya Anand ran the story two days later, once Detective Okafor confirmed on record that the death was being investigated as a homicide with a possible connection to Emily Carter's disappearance — careful, factual, stripped of speculation the Herald's legal team wouldn't clear, but unmistakable in its implication all the same. ENGINEER FOUND DEAD DAYS AFTER CONTACTING INVESTIGATOR IN CARTER CASE, the headline read, and within hours, two other regional outlets had picked up the story, and Cross Global's stock dipped nearly four percent before a carefully worded statement from the company's communications office restored most of the loss by afternoon's close.

"We categorically reject any suggestion that Cross Global Technologies was involved in this tragedy," the statement read, in language Bentley recognized immediately as Marcus Vane's careful, deniable phrasing. "Mr. Rodriguez left the company on good terms four months ago, and we extend our deepest sympathies to his family during this difficult time."

"Good terms," Sarah repeated, reading the statement over Bentley's shoulder with visible disgust. "He fled into hiding for four months because he was terrified of the company he supposedly left on good terms."

"It's not meant to convince us," Bentley said. "It's meant to give every reporter covering this story a quote they're legally obligated to include, and every reader skimming the article a reason to believe there's reasonable doubt where there isn't any. That's the entire function of a statement like this. It doesn't need to be believed. It only needs to exist."

*"A false witness shall not be unpunished, and he that speaketh lies shall not
escape."*

— **Proverbs 19:5**



The team gathered in near silence that evening, the weight of Rodriguez's death settling over the office in a way none of the previous violence had quite managed to, perhaps because this loss had arrived through Mason's own careful search, a fact the young man had not yet found a way to sit with comfortably.

"I found him," Mason said quietly, staring at his own hands rather than his monitors for the first time since Bentley had known him. "I'm the reason anyone knew where to look for David Rodriguez. If I hadn't traced that Facebook comment, he'd still be hiding in that cabin, scared but alive."

"He'd still be hiding," Victoria said gently, "and Emily would still be missing, and eleven states of unauthorized surveillance would still be operating without a single piece of physical evidence connecting it to Cross Global's leadership. You didn't kill him, Mason. The people who decided a frightened engineer's conscience was more dangerous to them than his silence killed him. Don't let them hand you their guilt along with everything else they've taken from this investigation."

Bentley looked at his team — Mason's visible grief, Sarah's controlled, simmering anger, Victoria's careful, steady presence — and thought of Rodriguez's final note, of a man who had chosen, in the end, to trust something larger than his own fear even knowing the cost it might carry. He thought, too, of Rachel, and of a mountain road that had never given up its own answer, and understood, with a clarity that felt almost unbearable, exactly how much this investigation had already cost, and exactly how much more it might yet demand before it was finished.

"Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord."

— **Romans 12:19**



Bentley added the final entry to the Cross Investigation folder that night, his handwriting steady despite everything the day had cost him.

David Rodriguez, Cross Global systems architect, murdered en route to scheduled meeting — staged to appear accidental, forensically inconsistent with fall. State police (Det. Okafor) now handling as active homicide, outside Ashford Falls PD jurisdiction. Physical evidence recovered: internal Cross Global communications referencing "acceptable exposure risk" regarding early Eye prototype deployment. Confirms pattern — company treats human cost of concealment as a managed business variable rather than a moral failure.

He closed the folder and sat for a long time in the quiet of the office, thinking of a man he had never met in person, who had driven four hours through the dark carrying evidence heavy enough to cost him his life, choosing to come anyway rather than remain safely hidden. He thought of Emily's voice, recovered from eleven degraded seconds of audio, quoting Scripture to the men forcing her into a vehicle. He thought of Grace Carter's steady faith, of Frank's stubborn refusal to accept easy answers, of Pastor Grant's patient insistence that faith and evidence measured different things but were never truly enemies.

"The price of truth," he said quietly, to the empty office, "keeps getting higher. I hope, whatever this ultimately costs, that it turns out to have been worth paying."

"There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— Luke 12:2

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Rachel's Memory

"For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth."

— Job 19:25

Bentley spread Rachel's incident file across his desk on the night after Rodriguez's body was recovered, not for the seventeenth time, as he had done so many times over the preceding six years, but with a different set of eyes than he had ever brought to it before — the eyes of a man who had just knelt beside a staged accident scene and read its falseness in thirty seconds, and who understood, with a clarity that made his hands unsteady as he opened the folder, exactly what he should have been looking for the entire time.

He read the original accident report first, the same flat, procedural language he had memorized years earlier. No skid marks consistent with mechanical failure. No other vehicle involved. Weather and road conditions cited as contributing factors. Case closed. He had spent six years treating that absence of evidence as proof there was nothing more to find. Tonight, for the first time, he read it instead as exactly the kind of report a careful, patient professional might produce after staging a scene meticulously enough that a grieving husband's own exhaustive review would never uncover the seam.

He remembered, with a clarity that still ached six years later, the exact moment he had learned. A supervisor's careful knock at his office door, ten-forty at night, the particular gentleness in the man's voice that Bentley had recognized, even before a single word was spoken, as the register reserved for news that would reorganize the rest of a person's life around a single unbearable fact. He remembered driving to the hospital with a control he had not fully understood, in the moment, as shock rather than composure. He remembered identifying her, and the strange, suspended clarity of standing in a room that smelled of antiseptic and understanding that every ordinary plan he'd ever made — dinners, anniversaries, the vague, unexamined assumption of decades still ahead of them — had simply ceased to exist somewhere on a wet mountain road he hadn't even known she was driving that night.

He had not cried, not then, not for weeks afterward, a fact that had frightened Sarah more than his eventual grief ever did, because she understood, better than he did at the time, that a man who could not weep was usually a man storing the weight somewhere it would eventually have to surface.

"Thou tellest my wanderings: put thou my tears into thy bottle: are they not in thy book?"

— Psalm 56:8



"Talk me through what you're seeing," Sarah said, arriving at the office past midnight after Bentley's call, still in the same clothes she'd worn since the drive back from Pine Ridge, understanding without being told that this was not a conversation that could wait until morning.

"Rodriguez's scene was staged to look like a fall — deliberate bruising inconsistent with the position of the body, an impact angle that didn't match the terrain around him, evidence of a second vehicle that left before we arrived." Bentley pointed to the corresponding sections of Rachel's own report. "Look at this. The responding officer noted the vehicle's final resting

position as 'consistent with loss of control on the curve.' But there's a photograph here, buried in the case file's original evidence log, that I haven't looked at properly in years because I convinced myself I'd already extracted everything useful from it." He slid the photograph across the desk. "The debris field. It's too contained, Sarah. A car losing control at the speed investigators estimated Rachel was traveling should scatter wreckage across a considerably wider radius than what's documented here. I know that now, because I've spent the last three weeks learning exactly what a professionally staged scene looks like compared to a genuine accident."

*"Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy
countenance."*

— Psalm 90:8



Sarah studied the photograph for a long time, her own trained eye moving across details Bentley had stared at so many times over six years that he'd nearly stopped seeing them freshly at all. "You're right," she said finally, quietly. "I should have caught this six years ago. We both should have. But Bentley — I want to say something, and I want you to actually hear it rather than just wait for me to finish talking. This is one photograph, one debris pattern, examined years after the fact, by two people who desperately want to find a connection because it would mean Rachel's death finally makes sense. That desire doesn't make us wrong. But it also doesn't make us right, and I won't stand here and let you build a conviction on hope alone when hope is exactly what got both of us into trouble the first time we tried to solve this."

"I know the difference between hope and evidence, Sarah."

"Do you?" Her voice was gentle, but the question landed with weight. "Because six years ago, you spent a year unable to accept that there was nothing more to find, and it nearly broke

you. I watched it happen. I'm not going to watch you walk back into that same fire without making sure you're walking in with your eyes fully open this time."

She was quiet for a moment, her gaze drifting to the old file spread across the desk, and when she spoke again, her voice had softened into something more personal than procedure. "I remember those eight months, Bentley. I remember driving out to that same overlook with you a dozen times, watching you measure the same skid marks over and over, hoping the road itself would finally confess something it had already decided not to tell us. I remember the night you called me at two in the morning because you'd convinced yourself a highway maintenance log proved something, and it turned out to be a scheduling error from an entirely unrelated construction crew. I watched hope nearly destroy you once already. I need you to understand that watching it happen again, even if this time it's justified, isn't something I can do casually."

Bentley absorbed that, thinking of nights he'd mostly managed to forget, or had told himself he'd forgotten, the particular manic hope of a grieving man convinced that persistence alone could force an answer out of silence. "I remember that night too," he said quietly. "I remember you drove forty minutes to sit with me in a parking lot until I calmed down enough to drive myself home safely. I never properly thanked you for that."

"You don't need to thank me for it," Sarah said. "You need to let me do it again, if it comes to that, without either of us pretending this time is somehow immune to the same danger."

"Prove all things; hold fast that which is good."

— 1 Thessalonians 5:21



Bentley sat with that for a long moment, turning the photograph over in his hands, feeling the particular ache of a man being asked to hold two truths at once — the truth that his instincts, sharpened now by weeks of confronting exactly this kind of professional deception, were very

possibly correct, and the truth that correctness alone, without verification, was precisely the trap that had already cost him a year of his life once before.

"You're right," he said finally. "I want this to be true. I want it badly enough that I don't fully trust my own read of that debris pattern right now. So we verify it the way we'd verify anything else in an active case. Properly. Slowly. Without assuming the conclusion before the evidence earns it."

He called Victoria the next morning, and she arrived within the hour, her own careful methodology exactly the counterweight the investigation needed. She spent two full days cross-referencing Rachel's case file against everything the team had assembled about Cross Global's operational history — timelines, shell company formation dates, the earliest known deployment locations of what Rodriguez's journal entries had called the first generation of The Eye.

"Here's what I can tell you with confidence," Victoria said, laying out her findings on the central table. "Rachel was investigating a construction contractor named Holloway Development, examining bid-rigging allegations connected to three city infrastructure projects. Holloway Development dissolved eighteen months after Rachel's death — not bankruptcy, a clean voluntary dissolution, its remaining assets and several key personnel absorbed into a company called Ridgeline Municipal Partners." Victoria let that settle before continuing. "Ridgeline Municipal Partners was acquired four years ago by Ashford Falls Municipal Solutions LLC — the same holding company that owns Meridian Systems Group, the same holding company Damian Cross personally authorized the acquisition of."

"Judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts."

— 1 Corinthians 4:5



The room went very quiet. Bentley stared at the chain Victoria had just laid out, feeling something he had not expected to feel amid the mounting evidence — not triumph, not even relief, but a strange, disorienting grief that arrived fresh and raw despite six years of accumulated distance, as though some part of him had never actually finished processing Rachel's death and had simply been waiting, patiently, for exactly this moment to demand its due.

"It's not proof," Victoria said carefully, watching his face. "I want to be precise about what this evidence actually shows, Bentley, because I think you need precision right now more than you need comfort. This shows that a company Rachel was investigating eventually merged, through several intermediate steps, into the same corporate structure now connected to Emily Carter's disappearance and Rodriguez's murder. It does not show that the same people who orchestrated those two events orchestrated Rachel's death. It doesn't show that her death wasn't exactly what the original report concluded it was. It shows a connection worth investigating seriously. That's a different thing than an answer, and I need you to hold that difference clearly, especially in the days ahead."

"I understand the difference," Bentley said quietly. "I've understood it my entire career. I'm only now starting to understand how much harder it is to hold onto that discipline when the case in question is your own wife instead of a stranger's."

Mason, who had been listening from his own desk without fully joining the conversation, spoke up quietly. "For what it's worth, Bentley, I ran the Ridgeline Municipal Partners formation documents last night after Victoria asked me to help cross-check the dates. The paperwork's clean on its face — nothing that would raise a flag in an ordinary search. But the registered agent who filed the original incorporation is the exact same law firm that handled Meridian Systems Group's formation two years later. Same firm, same two partners signing off both times. That's not proof of anything either, on its own. But it's one more thread pulling in the same direction as everything else we've found."

"How many more threads does it take," Victoria asked quietly, "before we stop calling it a coincidence and start calling it a pattern?"

"That's precisely the question I don't want us answering out of hope," Bentley said. "I want us answering it out of accumulated, verified evidence, the same way we'd answer it for any case that didn't have my own name written across the top of the file."

"And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."

— Romans 8:28



That evening, alone in his apartment, Bentley did something he had not done in longer than he could easily calculate. He opened the small cedar box he kept on the top shelf of his closet, untouched for years, containing the handful of Rachel's personal effects he had never been able to either use or discard — a few pieces of jewelry, a stack of handwritten letters from the early years of their marriage, and a slim reporter's notebook, her own private shorthand filling perhaps a third of its pages, abandoned mid-investigation the week she died.

He had read the notebook exactly once, in the terrible weeks after the funeral, searching desperately for anything that might explain what had happened to her, and had found nothing conclusive enough to bring to the Bureau's own investigators. He read it again now, slower, with the same patient care Victoria had applied to Emily's own coded journal, and found, near its final entries, a passage that stopped his breath entirely.

Halloway's lawyer mentioned a name today he clearly hadn't meant to say aloud — some silent partner backing the whole Ridgeline restructuring, someone he called "the investor from the coast," younger than I expected for someone with this much capital behind him. I couldn't get a full name. Something with a C. I'll chase it down properly next week once I've finished the current round of interviews.

Bentley sat with the notebook open in his hands for a long time, the apartment silent around him, the small transmitting device still resting inert behind the smoke detector where

Mason had left it weeks earlier as a reminder of exactly how thoroughly his privacy had already been compromised. Something with a C. Not proof. Not a name. A fragment, incomplete, exactly the kind of lead Rachel had never gotten the chance to finish chasing.

*"I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead,
yet shall he live."*

— John 11:25



He drove to the small cemetery outside the city the following morning, something he did perhaps twice a year and had come to dread slightly less each time, though the dread never fully disappeared. Rachel's headstone sat beneath a maple tree she would have loved for exactly the reason Bentley had chosen the spot — the way morning light filtered gold and green through its branches, the way it would turn brilliant orange every autumn without fail, a small, ordinary beauty she had never stopped noticing in a world that had, in the end, not been gentle enough to deserve her attention to it.

He did not bring flowers. He had never been a man who found comfort in that particular ritual. He simply stood for a long while in the cool morning air, the cedar-box notebook still in his jacket pocket, and said, quietly, the thing he had never quite managed to say plainly in six years of visits.

"I think I might finally understand what happened to you," he said. "I don't know yet. I want you to know I'm being careful, the way you'd want me to be careful, not just grabbing at the first answer that lets me stop hurting. But I think I'm closer than I've ever been, and I think — I hope — that if I'm right, it means your death is finally going to mean something beyond the grief it's cost everyone who loved you. I think it might already be helping me find someone else's daughter home."

He thought of Pastor Grant's words from weeks earlier — a detective searches for evidence, a believer searches for meaning, sometimes God provides both — and found, standing in the quiet of that small cemetery with the maple leaves beginning their first turn toward autumn gold, that he no longer entirely disbelieved the sentence, even if he could not yet say he fully believed it either.

He stayed longer than he had planned to, sitting eventually on the low stone bench a groundskeeper had installed near the plot years earlier, and found himself, for the first time in longer than he could easily calculate, simply talking — not reciting facts about the case, not rehearsing arguments he intended to make to Sarah or Victoria, but talking the way he had once talked to Rachel across their kitchen table, about nothing in particular and everything that mattered, filling the silence not because he expected an answer but because some part of him had missed, more than he'd allowed himself to admit, having someone to say these things to at all.

"Mason reminds me of you a little," he said. "Not in any obvious way. But he's got that same stubborn conviction that some truths are worth chasing even when chasing them costs him something. I think you'd have liked him. I think you'd have liked all of them, actually — Sarah, Victoria, even the Carters. Grace especially. She reminds me of you in a way I wasn't ready to notice until fairly recently." He paused, looking up through the maple branches at a sky gone pale gold with early morning light. "I've started reading again. Your Bible, not mine — mine's still sitting on the corner of my desk, mostly closed, but I've been reading yours some nights instead. I think I finally understand why you kept two."

*"For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them
that fear him."*

— Psalm 103:11

*"Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing: thou hast put off my
sackcloth, and girded me with gladness."*



Back at the office that afternoon, he gathered the team one final time to lay out the path forward, careful, as he had promised Sarah, not to let hope outrun evidence.

"We treat the Rachel connection exactly like every other lead in this case," he said. "No shortcuts, no assumptions, no conclusions before the evidence earns them. Victoria continues building the corporate timeline. Mason, I want everything you can find about who controlled Ridgeline Municipal Partners in the months immediately before and after Rachel's death, and I want to know if 'the investor from the coast' has a paper trail anywhere in those early records. Sarah, I want the original accident scene photographs sent to an independent forensic analyst — someone with no connection to this case, no stake in the outcome, who can tell us honestly whether that debris pattern is consistent with staging or whether I'm simply seeing what six years of grief has finally given me permission to see."

"And if the analyst says it was exactly what the original report concluded?" Victoria asked, not unkindly, but directly, the way she always spoke when the answer mattered too much to soften.

Bentley considered the question for a long moment, thinking of Rachel's own steady, unhurried faith, of a verse she had once read him about walking through valleys without being consumed by them, of Grace Carter's insistence that faith and fear could occupy the same room without either one canceling the other out.

"Then I accept that answer," he said finally, "the way I've asked everyone in this room to accept hard answers throughout this entire case. But I don't think that's what we're going to find, and for the first time in six years, I don't think that hope is foolish. I think it might simply be early."

"There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— Luke 12:2

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Hidden Facility

"And the LORD said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people... and I am come down to deliver them."

— Exodus 3:7

The break came from a direction none of them expected, three days after Bentley's visit to Rachel's grave, when Mason's overnight search through Ridgeline Municipal Partners' oldest property filings surfaced a deed transfer buried so far back in the company's history that it predated even Rachel's original investigation of Halloway Development by nearly two years.

"It's a parcel outside Millbrook," Mason said, spreading a printed map across the central table at seven in the morning, his voice carrying the particular sharpened urgency Bentley had learned to recognize as a genuine breakthrough rather than another dead end. "Twenty-two acres, an old agricultural research station the state decommissioned back in the nineties. Halloway Development bought it quietly, renovated part of it under an industrial permit that was never actually used for anything the permit described, then folded the property into Ridgeline's holdings when the companies merged. It's been sitting there, technically, under Cross Global's ultimate ownership for four years, completely off their current operational books. No utility contracts under any name I can trace to their active subsidiaries. No security company on record. As far as any public filing is concerned, it doesn't exist as anything other than an unused agricultural site."

"Which makes it perfect," Victoria said quietly, studying the satellite imagery Mason pulled up beside the map. "A location with no paper trail connecting it to their current operations is exactly where you'd keep something you needed to be certain no investigator would ever think to look."

Bentley traced the parcel's outline on the printed map with a steady finger, feeling the peculiar vertigo of an investigation folding back on itself in a way he hadn't anticipated. "Millbrook," he said quietly. "Twenty minutes from Frank and Grace Carter's own front door. Twenty minutes from the church where Pastor Grant baptized Emily as a girl." He shook his head slowly. "They've been keeping her practically in her parents' backyard this entire time, confident enough in their own invisibility that proximity never struck them as a risk."

"That's not arrogance," Sarah said. "Or it's not only arrogance. It's confidence built on a real track record — four years of that property sitting there completely unnoticed by anyone, including two federal-trained investigators who've been actively looking for exactly this kind of location for three weeks straight. We only found it because Mason went back far enough in the paperwork to predate the company's current name entirely."

"For with God nothing shall be impossible."

— **Luke 1:37**

"The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them."

— **Psalms 34:7**



Bentley studied the satellite images with the same disciplined patience he had applied to every scene of this investigation, and felt, within minutes, the particular certainty that came only when disparate threads finally converged into a single unmistakable shape. The main building sat

low and unremarkable behind a tree line, exactly the kind of structure a casual observer would drive past without a second glance. But the newer imagery, dated within the last eighteen months, showed something the older photographs did not — a reinforced perimeter fence installed well beyond what any agricultural facility would require, and, in the far corner of the property, a small cluster of what looked like generator housings considerably larger than the building's modest size would seem to justify.

"Power draw," Mason confirmed, cross-referencing utility satellite thermal data he'd pulled through a source Bentley had learned, over the preceding weeks, not to ask too many questions about. "Same signature we found at the Meridian Applied Research facility. Whatever's running inside that building, it isn't refrigerating soybeans."

"There's more," Sarah said, scrolling through a set of vehicle records she'd requested from a contact at the state's motor pool division. "A fleet vehicle registered under Marcus Vane's authorization — the same account tied to the SUV that took Emily — pinged a highway toll camera on the route toward Millbrook four times in the last six weeks. Always late at night. Always returning by early morning."

Bentley stood very still, looking at the map, feeling the case's entire shape settle into focus with a clarity that made his pulse quicken despite six years of practiced discipline. "That's not a supply run pattern," he said quietly. "That's a pattern for moving someone, or checking on someone, who needs to stay hidden but can't be left entirely unattended."

"Though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry."

— **Habakkuk 2:3**



The urgency arrived less than an hour later, in the form of a call Sarah took from Detective Okafor, her expression shifting from professional calm to visible alarm within the first thirty seconds of the conversation.

"Okafor's team pulled financial records connected to Rodriguez's murder investigation," Sarah said, setting the phone down carefully once the call ended. "A payment cleared two days ago from a Cross Global shell account to a private disposal contractor — the kind of company that handles industrial demolition, hazardous cleanup, that sort of work. Scheduled for a property outside Millbrook, effective this weekend."

The room went very quiet.

"They're closing it down," Victoria said. "The facility, and whatever's still inside it. Cross Global knows the investigation is closing in — the gala, the break-in, Rodriguez's death making headlines despite their statement, all of it's converged into more pressure than they anticipated absorbing this quickly. A demolition contractor doesn't get scheduled on a property like this by accident, and it doesn't get scheduled this fast unless someone made the decision that whatever's there has become more dangerous to keep than to erase."

Bentley felt something cold and absolute settle over him, the particular clarity of a man who understood, in a single unbearable instant, exactly what those words meant if Emily Carter was still alive inside that building. "How many days," he said.

"The contractor's paperwork lists Saturday morning," Sarah said. "That's two days, Bentley. Maybe less, if they decide to move the timeline up now that Rodriguez's death has made headlines."

*"For I am poor and needy; yet the Lord thinketh upon me: thou art my help and
my deliverer; make no tarrying, O my God."*

— Psalm 40:17



"We need proof of life before we do anything else," Bentley said, already moving toward the equipment locker where the agency kept its surveillance gear. "If Emily's inside that building, I am not leading a rescue operation into a facility I haven't confirmed she's actually in. And if

she's not there, or if she's already been moved, I need to know that before we commit resources we can't take back once we've spent them."

"I can get eyes on the property by tonight," Mason said. "Long-range thermal, positioned from the tree line across the road. I won't be able to confirm identity from that distance, but I can confirm occupancy — how many heat signatures, roughly where they're concentrated inside the structure, whether there's a pattern consistent with a held prisoner versus a working security detail."

Victoria was already pulling up everything the team had assembled about the facility's likely internal layout, cross-referencing the building's original agricultural blueprints against the newer construction visible in satellite imagery. "If I were designing a holding location inside a building like this, I'd use the original cold storage wing — reinforced walls already built for temperature control, easily adapted for containment, positioned away from the exterior windows that would otherwise let outside observers see anything unusual." She traced a section of the blueprint. "Here. If she's there, this is where I'd expect to find her."

*"Then they cried unto the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them out of
their distresses."*

— **Psalm 107:6**



Bentley and Mason drove out to Millbrook that evening, parking a half mile down a rural access road and moving on foot the remaining distance through a stand of trees that gave them a clear, elevated view of the facility's rear perimeter. Mason set up his thermal equipment with the same quiet efficiency he'd shown at the Meridian facility weeks earlier, and Bentley watched, in the cooling autumn dark, as the building's interior heat signatures resolved slowly into a pattern none of them could have confirmed from satellite data alone.

Three figures moved through what appeared to be a central corridor, spaced and paced in a rhythm Bentley recognized immediately as security patrol rather than casual movement. And in the building's northeast corner — exactly where Victoria's analysis had predicted, in the old cold storage wing — a single, smaller heat signature sat motionless in what the thermal imaging suggested was a seated or reclined position, unmoving for the better part of the ninety minutes they observed, except for the occasional, unmistakably human shift of posture that told Bentley, with a certainty that made his chest tighten, that whoever was in that room was alive.

"That's her," Bentley said quietly, watching the small, still signature through the scope. "Has to be. Nobody guards an empty room with three armed patrols."

They watched for another hour, cataloguing the patrol pattern with the same patient discipline Victoria had once applied to the Meridian facility — the three guards rotating on a roughly twenty-minute cycle, a fourth figure appearing briefly near what looked like a security office at the building's front before disappearing again, no visible pattern break that suggested awareness of their presence in the tree line. Mason logged timestamps in a small notebook, building the shift map Bentley would need to plan an actual approach.

"Twenty-minute rotation means there's a window," Mason said quietly, not looking up from his notes. "Not a big one. But if the pattern holds for another night, there's roughly ninety seconds where two of the three patrol routes overlap on the building's east side, leaving the west corridor — closest to that cold storage wing — effectively uncovered."

"Ninety seconds isn't much room for error," Bentley said.

"No," Mason agreed. "But it's the only window this building's going to give us before Saturday morning, and I'd rather work with ninety real seconds than wish for a window that doesn't exist."

"For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him."

— 2 Chronicles 16:9

"He sent from above, he took me, he drew me out of many waters."

— Psalm 18:16



They drove back to Larkspur Street well past midnight, and Bentley called the team together immediately despite the hour, understanding that the two-day window Okafor's information had given them was already shrinking with every hour spent confirming rather than acting.

"We have proof of occupancy consistent with a held prisoner, guarded by a minimum of three armed personnel, inside a facility scheduled for demolition in under forty-eight hours," Bentley said, laying the thermal images across the table. "I want to be honest with everyone in this room about what that means. This isn't a break-in for evidence anymore. This is an extraction, under a hard deadline, against armed opposition, and I am not going to pretend the risk is anything less than what it actually is."

"You're not doing this alone," Sarah said immediately, and there was no room in her voice for negotiation.

"I wasn't planning to," Bentley said. "But I need everyone in this room to understand what we're walking toward before any of you commit to walking toward it with me. Mason, I need every piece of intelligence you can gather on that facility's security rotation in the next twenty-four hours — shift changes, response protocols, anything that gives us a window. Victoria, I want a full risk assessment on Emily's likely physical and psychological state after this many weeks in captivity, so whoever goes in knows exactly what they might be walking into and how to handle it. Sarah—"

"I'm going in with you," Sarah said, before he could finish. "That part isn't a discussion, Bentley. Everything else is."

Victoria spoke next, her voice steady despite the gravity of what she was volunteering for. "I want to be honest about my limitations here — I'm not trained for a physical extraction the way the two of you are. But I can be useful outside that building. If Emily's been held for this many weeks, whatever state we find her in, she's going to need someone who understands trauma response better than either of you have been trained to, someone who can help her feel safe the moment she's out rather than simply rescued. I want to be in the vehicle, close enough to reach her the second she's clear."

"And I'm running comms and the loop technique from a secure position near the tree line," Mason said. "Same setup as Meridian, except this time the stakes are considerably higher than photographs, so I'm not taking a single unnecessary risk with the equipment. I want a backup system running in parallel in case the primary fails at the worst possible moment."

Bentley looked around the table at each of them in turn — Sarah's flat, unshakeable resolve, Victoria's careful, compassionate practicality, Mason's focused technical determination — and felt, not for the first time in recent weeks, the particular weight of leading people who had chosen, entirely of their own will, to walk into danger alongside him rather than simply working for him.

"Thank you," he said quietly, and found the words carried more than they usually did. "All of you. I built this agency six years ago telling myself I never wanted to need anyone else's help to finish a case. I'm glad, tonight, that I was wrong about that."

"There is no restraint to the LORD to save by many or by few."

— **1 Samuel 14:6**

"The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy... he will joy over thee with singing."

— **Zephaniah 3:17**



Bentley called Frank and Grace Carter last, after the team had scattered to their assigned preparations, sitting alone in his office with the phone heavy in his hand and the particular weight of a promise he was about to make without any certainty he could fully keep it.

"We've found her," he said, when Grace answered, and heard the sharp, involuntary intake of breath on the other end of the line, heard Frank's voice immediately in the background asking what had happened. "I believe she's alive, Mrs. Carter. I want to be careful with that word — believe. I have strong evidence, not absolute certainty. But I have enough to act on, and we're acting on it within the next two days."

Grace was quiet for a long moment, and when she spoke, her voice carried a steadiness that Bentley had come to recognize, over the preceding weeks, as something considerably deeper than simple composure. "I've been praying for this call every single day since you took this case, Mr. Blackwood. I want you to hear me say something before you go do whatever you're about to go do. You are not walking into that building alone, whatever it looks like to the people standing beside you. I need you to believe that the way I believe it, even if it's a harder thing for you to hold onto than it is for me."

"I'll try," Bentley said, and found, to his own quiet surprise, that the words did not feel as foreign in his mouth as they might have three weeks earlier.

*"Be strong and of good courage, and do it: fear not, nor be dismayed: for the
LORD God, even my God, will be with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake
thee."*

— 1 Chronicles 28:20



Late that night, alone in his apartment with the extraction plan still taking shape on the desk in front of him, Bentley opened Rachel's Bible one more time, the small leather cover soft

and familiar now in a way it had not been three weeks earlier, and found himself turning, without quite deciding to, toward a passage he remembered her reading aloud once, years ago, before a dangerous interview he had begged her not to take.

"For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways."

— Psalm 91:11

He read it twice, slowly, and thought of a small, still heat signature in a cold storage room forty minutes outside Millbrook, of a young woman who had quoted Scripture to the men forcing her into a vehicle rather than begging for her own life, of Rodriguez's final note about faith not being the absence of fear but the decision that Someone was bigger than the thing you feared. He thought, too, of Rachel, reading this exact passage aloud in a kitchen that no longer existed in the same configuration it had existed in then, her voice steady in a way his own had never quite managed to be until recently.

"Two days," he said quietly, closing the Bible, setting it beside the pocket watch on his desk rather than returning either of them to their usual hiding places. "Whatever happens in that building, I'm not walking in there alone. I finally believe that. I just wish it hadn't taken this long to understand it."

"There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— Luke 12:2

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Rescue

"The LORD is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer."

— Psalm 18:2

Detective Okafor listened to Bentley's full presentation the following morning without interrupting once — the thermal imagery, the shift patterns, the demolition contractor's paperwork, the corporate chain linking the Millbrook property back through Ridgeline Municipal Partners to Cross Global's own authorized acquisitions — and when he finished, she sat quietly for a long moment before she spoke.

"This is enough for an emergency warrant," she said finally. "Not because it's airtight, Mr. Blackwood, but because a demolition contractor scheduled on a property connected to an active homicide investigation, combined with financial records tying that property to a company already under scrutiny, gives a judge more than enough grounds to authorize entry before evidence disappears. I can have a tactical team assembled by tonight. State jurisdiction, properly documented, properly warranted — which means whatever we find in there will actually hold up in court, unlike a private break-in that a defense attorney could get thrown out in an afternoon."

"I want to be part of the entry team," Bentley said.

"I expected you to say that," Okafor said. "You've done more of the actual investigative work on this case than my own department managed in three weeks, and you know that building's interior layout better than anyone on my roster. You and Ms. Whitmore go in with my team, under my command, following my protocols exactly. That's not negotiable, and if either of you can't accept that condition, you're welcome to wait in the command vehicle with everyone else who isn't wearing a badge tonight."

"The LORD shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace."

— Exodus 14:14



They staged three miles from the Millbrook property at eleven that night, a convoy of unmarked vehicles assembling in the gravel lot of a closed feed store, eight tactical officers checking equipment with the quiet, practiced efficiency of professionals who had done this many

times before under considerably less personal stakes than Bentley carried into this particular operation. Sarah stood beside him, both of them fitted with the same protective gear the state team wore, and Bentley felt, for the first time in six years, the specific, focused calm that had once defined the best of his Bureau career — not the absence of fear, but its careful, disciplined management.

Mason's voice crackled through the earpiece from his position in the command vehicle, monitoring the facility's thermal signatures in real time. "Patrol pattern's holding steady. Three guards, same rotation we clocked last night. Cold storage signature's still there, still showing the same movement pattern. I think she's still exactly where we found her."

"Copy that," Okafor said, checking her watch. "We move in twenty minutes, on my mark, timed to your ninety-second window on the west corridor. Blackwood, Whitmore — you're with the secondary team breaching the west entrance. Primary team hits the front and the security office simultaneously. Nobody moves until I give the signal."

Bentley checked his own equipment one final time, and found his hand drifting, without conscious decision, to the small weight of the pocket watch in his jacket pocket, and beside it, folded carefully, a single page torn from Rachel's Bible — not the original, which he had left safely on his desk, but a photocopy he had made that morning of the passage he'd read the night before, carried now the way another man might carry a photograph into danger.

"He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler." — Psalm 91:4



The convoy moved out at 11:40, running dark along the rural access road, and Bentley felt the particular compressed clarity of the final minutes before action — every sense sharpened, every unnecessary thought stripped away, the whole of his attention narrowing down to the single objective waiting somewhere inside that unremarkable low building ahead.

They breached the tree line on foot at 11:52, moving in disciplined silence toward the facility's west perimeter, and Bentley watched, through his own night vision equipment, the building's silhouette resolve into sharper detail as they closed the distance — the reinforced fence Mason had identified from satellite imagery, the generator housings humming faintly in the cold night air, the single security light mounted above the west entrance casting a narrow cone of illumination across an otherwise dark approach.

"Sixty seconds to window," Okafor's voice murmured through the earpiece.

Bentley's pulse steadied into the particular rhythm he remembered from his most dangerous Bureau operations, years now in the past but never fully forgotten, muscle memory reasserting itself with a fluency that surprised him even as he moved through it. Beside him, Sarah's breathing matched the same controlled cadence, both of them counting down in silence toward a threshold neither of them could fully know what waited beyond.

"With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible."

— **Mark 10:27**



The window opened exactly as Mason had predicted, the two eastern patrol routes overlapping in a rare, brief convergence that left the west corridor unguarded for precisely as long as his analysis had promised. Okafor's tactical team breached the reinforced door with practiced efficiency, and Bentley and Sarah moved through immediately behind them, weapons ready, the facility's interior opening before them in the same sterile, controlled architecture Bentley had come to recognize as Cross Global's institutional signature even in a building the company's current leadership claimed no operational knowledge of.

Shouting erupted almost immediately from the building's front section — the primary team's simultaneous breach triggering the alarm response Bentley had known was inevitable no

matter how carefully they'd planned the entry — and he heard, over the rising chaos, Okafor's voice calling for surrender, followed by the flat crack of a single warning shot fired into the ceiling rather than at a target, a professional's deliberate restraint even in the compressed adrenaline of an active breach.

"West corridor, moving to cold storage," Bentley said into his own comm unit, already advancing, Sarah half a step behind him, both of them moving with the fluid, practiced coordination that had carried them safely out of the Meridian facility weeks earlier.

A guard rounded the corridor's far corner, weapon raised, and Sarah's training answered before conscious thought could intervene, a controlled shot dropping the man before he could bring his own weapon fully to bear, and Bentley felt the specific, terrible clarity of violence experienced rather than merely investigated, a sensation he had not fully readied himself for despite every year of training that should have prepared him.

A second guard appeared almost immediately behind the first, better positioned, already firing before either Bentley or Sarah could react, and Bentley felt the round pass close enough to hear its displacement of air beside his ear before it buried itself in the corridor wall behind him. He returned fire on instinct, striking the man's shoulder rather than anything more lethal, enough to drop him and end the immediate threat without crossing a line Bentley had not fully reconciled himself to crossing even now, even here, even with everything at stake.

"Clear," Sarah said, breathing hard, already moving past the fallen guards toward the cold storage door ahead, checking each man briefly for further threat before continuing. "Keep moving, Bentley. We don't have time to process this now."

He knew she was right, and he moved, though some part of him understood that the processing would come later, in whatever quiet space this investigation eventually allowed him, the way every difficult thing he had ever done in service of a case eventually demanded its reckoning once the adrenaline finally receded.

"The LORD stood with me, and strengthened me... and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion."

— 2 Timothy 4:17



They reached the cold storage wing's heavy door ninety seconds later, its keypad lock the same style Bentley had defeated at Meridian weeks earlier, his hands steadier than his racing heart would have suggested as he worked the mechanism free. The door yielded, and Bentley stepped through into a room considerably smaller and colder than he had allowed himself to imagine, its reinforced walls stripped of any comfort, a single cot pushed against the far corner.

Emily Carter looked up from the cot, thin and pale in a way three weeks of captivity had clearly cost her, her eyes adjusting slowly to the sudden light spilling in from the corridor, her expression shifting from confusion to a wary, disbelieving hope that Bentley recognized immediately as the particular fragile courage of someone who had trained herself, out of necessity, not to trust rescue until it had fully proven itself real.

"Emily Carter," Bentley said, keeping his voice low, steady, deliberately calm despite the chaos still audible from the building's front section. "My name is Bentley Blackwood. Your parents hired me three weeks ago. I'm here to take you home."

She stared at him for a long moment, and then, in a voice roughened by weeks of disuse but unmistakably steady beneath it, she spoke the words that Bentley had carried with him, in one form or another, through every single day of this investigation.

"Nothing covered stays hidden forever," she said. "I told them that. I told them, every single day I was in this room, that someone would come."

"Your mother said something almost identical to me the first day I took this case," Bentley said, kneeling beside the cot, keeping his voice gentle despite the urgency pressing at the

edges of every second they remained in this room. "She told me she didn't need me to have faith. She had enough for both of us. I think I finally understand what she meant by that."

Emily studied his face for a long moment, something shifting behind her exhausted eyes — recognition, perhaps, of a man who had clearly been changed by more than simply the work of finding her. "You didn't believe any of it when you started, did you," she said. "The verse. Any of it."

"No," Bentley admitted. "I didn't."

"And now?"

He thought of Pastor Grant's patient words, of Rachel's two Bibles and Emily's two Bibles worn thin at the exact same page, of a photocopied passage folded in his jacket pocket that he had carried into danger without fully understanding why until this precise moment. "Now I think I've stopped being quite so certain I have all the answers," he said. "Which, for a man like me, is probably as close to faith as I've managed to get in longer than I'd like to admit."

"There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— **Luke 12:2**



Sarah was beside her within seconds, checking for injuries with careful, practiced hands, murmuring reassurance in the low, steady tone she reserved for exactly this kind of moment, while Bentley kept his weapon trained on the corridor behind them, alert to the continued sounds of confrontation still echoing from elsewhere in the building.

"Can you walk?" Sarah asked gently.

"I can walk," Emily said, though the effort of standing clearly cost her more than her voice let on, and Sarah moved immediately to support her weight, one arm firm beneath her shoulders.

"Command, we have the target, she's alive, moving to extraction now," Bentley said into his comm, and heard Okafor's voice answer, tight with the controlled urgency of an operation still very much in progress.

"Copy that, Blackwood, but you need to move fast — we've got a problem. Second team's found what looks like a server room off the main corridor, and someone inside is actively destroying equipment. We've got smoke, possibly a deliberate fire, and I don't want you caught in that corridor if this building starts burning around us."

"The battle is not yours, but God's."

— 2 Chronicles 20:15



They moved back through the west corridor at a pace as fast as Emily's weakened condition allowed, and Bentley caught, through a half-open doorway they passed, a glimpse of exactly what Okafor had described — a server room already thick with acrid smoke, a man in dark clothing feeding documents into a portable shredder with frantic, practiced speed while flames, deliberately set, licked upward from a metal trash can positioned beneath a rack of hard drives.

The man looked up as they passed, and Bentley felt a jolt of recognition even through the smoke and chaos — not Marcus Vane himself, but someone Bentley recognized from the facility's earlier reconnaissance photos as part of the regular security detail, his face set in the particular grim determination of a man following explicit instructions rather than acting on his own initiative.

"Cross Global's not letting this evidence survive intact," Bentley said grimly, into his comm, even as he kept moving, Emily's safety taking absolute priority over any documents burning in a room they were rapidly leaving behind. "Whoever's in there is under orders to destroy everything before your team can secure it."

"Copy," Okafor said. "I've got two officers moving to intercept and suppress that fire now. Get her out, Blackwood. That's the priority. We'll save what we can of the rest."

"No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper."

— **Isaiah 54:17**



They reached the west entrance and the cold night air beyond it just as the building's fire alarm finally triggered, a shrill, mechanical wail cutting through the chaos, and Bentley caught, in the periphery of his vision, a black sedan pulling away from the facility's far side at high speed, its headlights dark, moving with the particular urgency of a man who had decided, in the final calculation, that his own escape mattered more than whatever remained to be salvaged inside the burning building.

"Vane," Sarah said, following his gaze, her voice tight with frustrated recognition. "He was here the whole time."

"Let him go," Bentley said, though the words cost him something to say. "Emily's safety comes first. We'll find him again. Men like that always resurface eventually, and next time we'll be better prepared for exactly this kind of exit."

Victoria met them at the tree line, exactly where she'd promised to be, and Bentley watched her professional composure crack, just slightly, with visible relief as she took in Emily's condition — thin, exhausted, but unmistakably alive, unmistakably free.

"You're safe now," Victoria said gently, guiding Emily toward the waiting vehicle. "Your parents are going to be so glad to see you. We've got a doctor waiting, and after that, whatever you need — time, rest, anything at all."

Emily looked back once, toward the burning building behind them, smoke now visible rising against the night sky, the distant sound of state police units finally arriving in force to

contain what remained of the fire. "The evidence," she said weakly. "Did they get the evidence too?"

"Some of it," Bentley said honestly, unwilling to offer her comfort dressed up as certainty even in this moment. "Not all of it. But you're alive, Miss Carter, and that matters more than any file that might have burned in there tonight. We'll build the rest of the case on everything else we've already gathered. I promise you that."

"They that sow in tears shall reap in joy."

— Psalm 126:5



Frank and Grace Carter arrived at the county hospital an hour before dawn, having driven the two hours from Millbrook the moment Bentley's call reached them, and Bentley watched from the corridor outside Emily's room as Grace crossed the distance to her daughter's bedside at something close to a run, gathering her carefully, carefully into an embrace that seemed determined never to let go again. Frank stood a step behind, his composure cracking at last after three weeks of holding it together through sheer stubborn will, tears running freely down a face that had spent twenty-six years learning not to show them in front of strangers.

"I never stopped believing you'd find her," Frank said to Bentley, once he'd found his voice again, gripping Bentley's hand with a strength that carried three weeks of accumulated gratitude behind it. "Not for one single day. I want you to know that."

"Your wife told me the same thing, the very first afternoon I met you both," Bentley said. "I believe her completely now. I don't think I fully did, back then."

Grace looked up from her daughter's bedside, her face wet with tears that had nothing left in them but relief, and found Bentley's eyes across the room with a gratitude too large for any single sentence to carry. She did not need to say anything. Bentley understood, watching her,

exactly what the moment meant to a woman who had prayed for this outcome every single day for three weeks without once allowing herself to doubt it might arrive.



Okafor's team spent the following two hours securing what remained of the facility, and the preliminary report she delivered to Bentley near dawn, standing together beside the command vehicle while the last of the smoke cleared from the Millbrook sky, carried the particular mixed weight of a victory that had cost something real even in its success.

"We've got six arrests," Okafor said. "Security personnel, the man who was running the shredder and the fire, a facility supervisor we found hiding in an office upstairs. Not Vane — he was gone before my perimeter team could cut off the access road, and I'll be honest with you, Blackwood, I don't expect we'll find him easily once Cross Global's lawyers get involved. But we've got physical evidence that survived the fire — enough server hardware in a secondary room the shredder crew never reached, enough documentation from the security office itself, to build a real case against everyone we arrested tonight, and enough corporate paper trail, thanks to your team's work, to make it very difficult for Cross Global to claim total ignorance of what this facility was actually used for."

"It's not everything," Bentley said quietly.

"No," Okafor agreed. "It's not everything. I don't think 'everything' was ever a realistic outcome against a company with this much reach, not in a single night, maybe not in a single year. But you got the only thing that actually mattered most tonight, Mr. Blackwood. You got her out alive. Everything else is a fight that continues from here, with considerably better footing than anyone had three weeks ago."

"There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— Luke 12:2

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Man Called Cross

"The lip of truth shall be established for ever: but a lying tongue is but for a moment."

— Proverbs 12:19

Priya Anand's story ran the following morning under a headline that traveled faster and further than anything Emily Carter herself had ever published: MISSING JOURNALIST FOUND ALIVE — SIX ARRESTED IN CONNECTION TO ILLEGAL SURVEILLANCE NETWORK. Within hours, every major outlet in the country had picked up some version of the story, and by afternoon, Cross Global Technologies' stock had shed nearly twelve percent of its value, its most significant single-day drop in company history.

Bentley spent the morning at the state police field office two hours outside Ashford Falls, laying out the full breadth of what the investigation had assembled for Detective Okafor and a deputy district attorney named Reyes — no relation, Bentley had confirmed carefully, to the corrupted captain who'd buried Emily's original case — the financial trail from Meridian Systems Group through Ridgeline Municipal Partners to Ashford Falls Municipal Solutions LLC, the recovered Project Sentinel documents, Rodriguez's journal and his murder, the eleven-state surveillance network, and finally, the single authorization signature that connected every layer of shell companies back to one name.

"Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil."

— Ecclesiastes 8:11

"This is substantial," Deputy DA Reyes said, when Bentley finished, studying the assembled documentation with the particular careful attention of a prosecutor already calculating what would and wouldn't survive a defense team's scrutiny. "I want to be honest with you about what it does and doesn't get us, Mr. Blackwood. It's enough to name Damian Cross a person of interest in an active state investigation. It's enough, combined with what my office already has on the six people arrested at that facility, to keep this case moving forward with real institutional weight behind it for the first time. It is not, on its own, enough to charge him with anything directly. His signature authorizes an acquisition — a legal business transaction on its face. Everything after that acquisition, everything that makes it sinister, runs through intermediaries his lawyers will insist he had no direct knowledge of."

"I understand the limitation," Bentley said. "I've understood it since the first week of this case. I'm not expecting an arrest tomorrow, Ms. Reyes. I'm expecting a beginning."

"Then you should know it's a real one," Reyes said. "Naming him person of interest changes the entire posture of this investigation. It means subpoena power against his personal records, not just the company's public filings. It means his lawyers have to start responding to us rather than simply managing a public relations problem. That's not nothing, Mr. Blackwood, even if I understand it isn't everything you wanted either."

Okafor, seated beside Reyes with a stack of her own case files, added her own careful assessment. "I've built cases against organized operations before, Mr. Blackwood, though never one with quite this much money behind it. What I can tell you from experience is that companies like Cross Global rarely fall from a single dramatic blow. They fall from accumulated pressure — a subpoena here, a cooperating witness there, a shareholder lawsuit that forces disclosures the criminal investigation alone never could. What you handed us last night gives every one of those pressure points somewhere real to attach to. That's worth more than it might feel like today, sitting in this room without an arrest warrant in hand."

"And the six people already in custody?" Bentley asked.

"Two are already talking," Reyes said. "Low-level security personnel, scared enough of a murder charge attaching to Rodriguez's death that they're considerably more interested in cooperation than loyalty to a company that's already made clear it's prepared to let them take the fall entirely alone. I expect at least one of them will give us something that reaches higher than the facility supervisor by the end of the week."

"He that speaketh truth sheweth forth righteousness: but a false witness deceit."

— **Proverbs 12:17**

"Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him: fret not thyself because of him who prospereth in his way."

— **Psalm 37:7**



Damian Cross held his press conference at four o'clock that afternoon, on the steps of Cross Tower, and Bentley watched the live broadcast from the agency's office alongside the rest of the team, all of them silent as the familiar, composed figure stepped up to a bank of microphones with the same unhurried confidence Bentley had witnessed firsthand at a gala three weeks earlier.

"I want to begin by saying how deeply relieved I am, as I know we all are, that Emily Carter has been found alive," Cross said, his voice carrying the practiced warmth that made four hundred wealthy donors weep over a hospital wing dedication. "What happened to her was a tragedy, and what has been alleged about a facility connected, through several layers of corporate ownership neither I nor my leadership team had any direct knowledge of, is deeply disturbing to me personally. Cross Global Technologies does not condone, has never condoned, and will never condone the kind of unauthorized activity described in recent reporting."

"He's lying," Mason said flatly, staring at the screen.

"He's not lying, technically," Victoria corrected quietly. "Watch his phrasing. 'Neither I nor my leadership team had any direct knowledge.' That's a carefully constructed sentence, Mason, built by lawyers who understand exactly how much daylight exists between a lie and a technically true statement designed to create a false impression. He's not committing perjury on that podium. He's performing plausible deniability, and he's very good at it."

"They speak vanity every one with his neighbour: with flattering lips and with a double heart do they speak."

— Psalm 12:2



A reporter's question cut through the prepared remarks — someone from a national outlet, sharper than the local press Cross Global's communications team had clearly expected to dominate the room. "Mr. Cross, your Director of Corporate Security, Marcus Vane, was reportedly present at the facility during last night's raid and fled before authorities could apprehend him. Can you explain why your own head of security was on-site at a facility your company claims no operational knowledge of?"

Something flickered behind Cross's composed expression — brief, controlled, but visible even through the broadcast's imperfect resolution, and Bentley recognized it immediately as the same recalibration he'd witnessed at the gala, a man adjusting in real time to an opponent proving sharper than anticipated.

"Mr. Vane's whereabouts and actions are, at this point, a matter I'm as concerned about as anyone," Cross said smoothly, recovering within a breath. "If he engaged in unauthorized activity using company resources, he will be terminated and fully cooperative with authorities the moment he's located, and I want to be unambiguous — Cross Global Technologies will support this investigation in every way permitted by law. We have nothing to hide."

A second reporter pressed further, undeterred by the smooth deflection. "Sources within the state investigation have described a nationwide surveillance network operating across eleven states without public authorization. Does Cross Global deny building such a network?"

"Cross Global has never operated any surveillance system without proper legal authorization and public disclosure," Cross said, and Bentley watched, with grim professional appreciation, exactly how carefully the sentence had been constructed — a denial that addressed the word "Cross Global" as a corporate entity while leaving entirely unaddressed whatever a subsidiary six layers removed from that name might have done under an entirely different set of corporate letterhead. "I understand the public's concern given recent events, and I want to be clear that I share it. If any part of this company's vast structure was misused for purposes I did not authorize and would never condone, I will personally ensure accountability once the facts are established through proper legal channels rather than trial by media speculation."

"He's already building his exit," Victoria said quietly. "Listen to the structure of that answer. He's not defending Project Sentinel. He's pre-positioning himself to eventually blame it entirely on subordinates acting without his knowledge, the same way he's already doing with Vane. By the time any of this reaches a courtroom, if it ever does, he'll have spent months laying the groundwork to be the wronged executive rather than the architect."

"He just said the verse," Sarah murmured, something dark and bitter in her voice. "He just stood up there and said 'we have nothing to hide,' knowing exactly what that phrase has meant to this entire investigation from the very first day."

"For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— **Luke 12:2**



Behind the composed public performance, in a conference room forty floors above the press conference's carefully staged backdrop, Damian Cross convened a considerably smaller and more honest meeting the moment the cameras stopped rolling — a meeting Bentley would only piece together weeks later, through fragments and inference, but which Victoria's own careful profile of the man would later describe, with unsettling accuracy, almost exactly as it actually occurred.

"The Blackwood problem has become considerably larger than I initially assessed," Cross said, according to the account Victoria eventually reconstructed from a source deep enough inside the company's legal division that Bentley never learned the person's name. "I underestimated him. I want that acknowledged plainly, because I don't intend to make the same mistake twice. Every legal avenue available to slow this investigation gets deployed, starting tonight. Every subpoena gets fought. Every deposition gets delayed. I want this case buried in procedure long enough that public attention moves elsewhere, the way it always does eventually."

"And Vane?" one of the lawyers reportedly asked.

"Mr. Vane," Cross said, according to the same account, "has become a liability whose usefulness has run its course. See that he's compensated generously for his silence, and see that his silence is guaranteed by whatever means prove necessary."

He was reported to have paused then, according to Victoria's later reconstruction, studying the darkened city beyond the conference room's windows for a long moment before adding one final instruction, delivered in the same calm, unhurried register he brought to every decision, however consequential.

"And I want a complete assessment of Bentley Blackwood," he said. "His finances, his associations, every case he's closed in the last five years, and everything the Bureau's personnel file on him will still yield through the appropriate channels. I underestimated one investigator once already this month. I have no intention of making that mistake a second time. If he intends

to spend years building a case against me, I intend to know exactly who I'm spending those years against."

"For he knoweth vain men: he seeth wickedness also; will he not then consider it?"

— Job 11:11

"An hypocrite with his mouth destroyeth his neighbour: but through knowledge shall the just be delivered."

— Proverbs 11:9



Bentley learned the full contents of that private meeting only much later, but he understood, even that first evening, watching Cross's practiced composure on the broadcast, exactly the kind of adversary he had committed himself to pursuing — patient, resourced, entirely willing to sacrifice anyone beneath him the moment they became inconvenient, and utterly confident that the machinery of law, slow and procedural by its very design, would never move fast enough to catch a man skilled enough to stay several steps ahead of it.

"This is going to take years," Bentley said quietly, once the broadcast ended and the office fell into a tired, contemplative silence. "Not weeks. Not months. He's already planning his legal response, and men like Damian Cross don't run out of lawyers before ordinary people run out of patience."

"I know," Victoria said. "I think you've known it since the gala, Bentley, even if you hadn't fully said it aloud until tonight."

Sarah crossed her arms, studying the frozen image of Cross's composed face still displayed on the monitor. "So what do we do with that? Accept that he walks away from this entirely untouched?"

"No," Bentley said, and something in his voice had settled into a register the whole team had come to recognize over the preceding weeks — not anger, exactly, but a patient, unhurried resolve that carried its own kind of danger for anyone standing in its path. "We build the file. Every case after this one, every lead that touches Cross Global in any capacity, gets added to it. This isn't finished tonight because it was never going to be finished tonight. I understood that the moment I read Rodriguez's journal entry about a company seven years into building something this large. Men like Damian Cross aren't stopped in a single confrontation. They're worn down, patiently, case by case, until the weight of everything they've buried finally becomes too heavy for even their resources to keep hidden."

Mason broke the heavy silence that followed with something that was not quite a joke, though it carried enough of one to ease the weight the room had been carrying since the broadcast ended. "So we're doing this for years now. Just so everyone's clear on what we all signed up for tonight."

"We were always doing this for years, Mason," Victoria said. "We simply understood it more honestly tonight than we did three weeks ago."

"I'm still in," Mason said, and there was no hesitation in it at all. "I just wanted it said out loud, once, so nobody could pretend later that they hadn't heard it clearly."

Sarah looked around the small office — the whiteboard still covered in Victoria's careful diagrams, Mason's wall of monitors finally dark for the night, the central table where a missing person's case had grown, over three extraordinary weeks, into something considerably larger than any of them had anticipated when Frank and Grace Carter first walked through that door. "Then let's get some rest," she said. "Whatever Damian Cross is planning tonight, it's not going to happen before morning, and none of us are any good to Emily, to Rachel, or to each other running on empty."

*"The LORD is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness;
but is long suffering to us-ward."*



That night, alone in his office, Bentley pulled the growing folder from his desk drawer — thicker now than it had been three weeks earlier, its tab still labeled in his own steady handwriting — and added a final entry for the day.

Damian Cross publicly named as person of interest, subpoena power now authorized against personal financial and communication records. Public statement denies knowledge of Sycamore Street facility, distances company from Marcus Vane pending his apprehension. Assessment: subject will deploy full legal resources to delay and obstruct rather than directly confront charges. This investigation does not conclude here. It continues, case by case, for as long as it takes.

He closed the folder and sat with it for a long moment, thinking of Emily Carter, sleeping safely in a hospital bed two hours away with her parents beside her. Thinking of Rodriguez, who had not survived to see any part of tonight's public reckoning. Thinking of Rachel, and a thread that had only begun to reveal itself, still years from any resolution he could promise with confidence. He thought, too, of Pastor Grant's words from weeks earlier — a detective searches for evidence, a believer searches for meaning — and understood, for the first time with real clarity, that this case had given him a considerable measure of both, even if neither had arrived in the form or the timeline he would have chosen for himself.

He thought, too, about how strange it was that a man who had spent six years insisting he trusted nothing he could not measure had ended up here — not with an ending, not with the tidy resolution his old self would have demanded before calling any case worth the effort, but with a beginning instead, open-ended and uncertain in exactly the way he had once found unbearable. He found, turning the thought over slowly in the quiet office, that he no longer minded the uncertainty quite as much as he once had. Some things, he was beginning to understand, were

worth pursuing precisely because they didn't resolve quickly — because the pursuit itself, patient and faithful across however many years it eventually required, was its own kind of answer to a world that too often mistook speed for justice.

He picked up the pocket watch from where it sat on his desk, opened it one final time that night, and looked again at the faded photograph inside — Rachel on a beach somewhere, laughing at something outside the frame. "I don't know how long this is going to take," he said quietly. "But I'm not walking away from it. Not this time. Not until every last piece of what that man's built comes apart the way it should have come apart a long time ago."

He wrote one final line at the bottom of the page, beneath the case notes, in handwriting steadier than it had been in longer than he cared to admit.

Case File: The Cross Investigation. Beginning.

"There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— Luke 12:2

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Cross File

"For that which ye have spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light; and that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops."

— Luke 12:3

Mason cracked the flash drive's encryption six days after Emily's rescue, at 4:12 in the morning, and the sound that woke Bentley in his apartment above the office was not his phone ringing but Mason's fist pounding on the interior stairwell door with the particular urgency of a

man who had forgotten, entirely, that a phone call would have been the more conventional way to deliver the news.

"I'm in," Mason said, breathless, when Bentley opened the door. "Bentley, I'm in. Six weeks of layered encryption, and I finally found the seam an hour ago. You need to see this. All of it. Right now, before I even fully understand what I'm looking at myself."

*"For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether
it be good, or whether it be evil."*

— Ecclesiastes 12:14



They gathered around the central table as dawn broke over Larkspur Street, Mason's monitors casting their pale blue light across faces that had not slept properly in days, and Bentley watched, with the particular clarity that came only at the exhausted edge of a long investigation, as file after file resolved on the screen into exactly the evidence Emily Carter had spent six months of her life risking everything to gather.

"Financial records first," Mason said, pulling up a spreadsheet dense with routing numbers and dates. "This isn't just the Meridian acquisition chain we already knew about. This is comprehensive — payments to seventeen different individuals across four states, all routed through the same layered shell structure, all authorized under Cross's personal signature code we already identified. City council members. A state legislative aide. Two officers we haven't previously connected to this case at all, in a department three counties over. Emily built a payment ledger, Bentley. A complete one, going back nearly three years."

Victoria leaned closer, scanning the names with growing intensity. "This isn't corruption limited to Ashford Falls. This is a functioning bribery network, operating across jurisdictions, built specifically to ensure that wherever The Eye's infrastructure needed quiet approval, someone with the authority to grant it had already been compensated to look the other way."

Sarah traced one entry with a growing frown. "There's a payment here to a lobbying consultancy — routed through the same account structure, disguised as a research grant. Two hundred thousand dollars, memo line reads 'community engagement initiative.' I did some digging on this firm six months ago, on an entirely unrelated matter. They specialize in astroturf opposition campaigns — manufacturing the appearance of grassroots resistance to whatever their clients need defeated. A church coalition in this state raised concerns about a surveillance ordinance eighteen months ago. Within weeks, a competing 'citizens group' appeared out of nowhere with a suspiciously well-funded media campaign painting the churches as obstructionist and out of touch. I didn't think anything of it at the time. I think differently about it now."

"They're not just buying silence," Bentley said quietly. "They're manufacturing opposition to anyone brave enough to speak against them. That's considerably more sophisticated than simple bribery."

*"Woe unto them that decree unrighteous decrees, and that write grievousness
which they have prescribed."*

— **Isaiah 10:1**

*"They afflict the just, they take a bribe, and they turn aside the poor in the gate
from their right."*

— **Amos 5:12**



The surveillance data proved, if anything, more damning than the financial records — technical logs documenting the precise scope of Project Sentinel's operation, confirming not eleven states as Emily's journal had estimated, but fourteen, with detailed deployment schedules for six additional cities planned over the coming eighteen months. Facial recognition accuracy reports. Behavioral prediction algorithms tested against real, identifiable residents of Ashford

Falls neighborhoods who had never consented to any part of the process being run against them. A internal memo, dated eight months earlier, discussing what its author called "acceptable false positive rates" in language so clinically detached from the human cost it described that Bentley found himself setting the page down for a moment before he could continue reading.

"They're testing predictive flagging," Victoria said quietly, reading over his shoulder. "Not just watching people, Bentley. Trying to predict who might become a threat before anything's actually happened, based on patterns the system itself decides are suspicious. That's not law enforcement. That's a presumption of guilt built directly into the architecture, applied to people who've never been charged with anything at all."

Bentley thought of Damian Cross's words at the gala, delivered with such calm, reasonable confidence. What does it cost a society to remain blind, when blindness is a choice rather than a limitation? He understood now, reading the cold technical language of the surveillance logs, exactly what the man had meant, and exactly how far that reasoning had already been permitted to travel in practice.

"If thou seest the oppression of the poor, and violent perverting of judgment and justice in a province, marvel not at the matter."

— Ecclesiastes 5:8



The coded communications took Victoria and Mason the better part of the morning to fully translate, a layered cipher considerably more sophisticated than Emily's own private shorthand, but one that yielded, once broken, a series of executive-level exchanges between Marcus Vane and at least three other individuals whose names appeared only as initials — a security precaution, Victoria observed, that told its own story about how seriously the company's leadership understood the criminal weight of what they were discussing.

One exchange, dated the week before Emily's disappearance, stopped Bentley cold.

V: Subject confirmed close to publication. Recommend immediate action per standard protocol.

D.C.: Handle it the way we handled the Denver situation. Quiet, deniable, permanent if the softer options fail. She's talented. That doesn't make her a friend to this company's future.

"D.C.," Sarah said quietly. "Damian Cross. Directly authorizing the response to Emily's story, in writing, in his own initials, six days before she vanished."

"It's not a signed confession," Bentley said, though his voice carried a grim satisfaction he did not fully bother to hide. "A defense attorney will argue initials aren't proof of authorship. But combined with everything else in this file — the financial trail, the surveillance data, Rodriguez's murder, the facility itself — this is the strongest single piece of evidence we've recovered in this entire investigation. This connects Damian Cross, by his own words, to the decision that led to Emily's abduction."

"The love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows."

— 1 Timothy 6:10



"There's more," Mason said quietly, and something in his voice made the whole room go still. "The Denver situation. It's referenced twice more in these communications. I ran a search this morning while you were all reading through the financial records." He turned his monitor around, displaying a local news archive from three years earlier. "A reporter named Diane Foster. Denver Tribune. Published an early investigation into a company called Sentinel Dynamics — a name that doesn't officially connect to Cross Global anywhere in public filings, but that matches exactly the internal project name used throughout this drive for the early prototype phase Rodriguez's journal described. Foster died six weeks after her story published. Single-vehicle accident. Wet road. No other vehicle involved."

The room went utterly silent. Bentley felt something cold settle into his chest, the particular recognition of a pattern he had spent six years refusing to fully believe existed, now laid out in front of him with a specificity he could no longer treat as coincidence.

"That's Rachel's death," Sarah said quietly. "Almost exactly. Different city, different year, same method, same conclusion in the official report."

"The heaven shall reveal his iniquity; and the earth shall rise up against him."

— Job 20:27



Bentley did not speak for a long moment, staring at the archived photograph of a woman he had never met, whose death now sat beside his wife's in a pattern too precise to dismiss as anything but deliberate. He thought of Rachel's own notebook entry — something with a C, the investor from the coast — and of a chain of corporate acquisitions that ran, however indirectly, from Halloway Development to the same structure that had funded Diane Foster's silencing three years later.

"Add her to the file," he said finally, his voice steady despite everything the discovery had cost him internally. "Diane Foster. Rachel Blackwood. Whoever else this pattern eventually reveals. This isn't two isolated deaths anymore. This is a methodology, refined over years, applied whenever this company decided a journalist had gotten close enough to something worth killing for."

Victoria studied him carefully, watching for the particular fracture she had warned him about weeks earlier when hope had first threatened to outrun evidence. "How are you, Bentley? Genuinely. I'm not asking as an investigator right now."

"I don't fully know yet," Bentley admitted. "I think some part of this is going to take longer to process than we have time for this morning. But I also think, for the first time in six

years, I'm not looking at an unanswerable question anymore. I'm looking at a pattern with a name attached to it. That's not nothing, even if it isn't peace yet either."

*"Thou, which hast shewed me great and sore troubles, shalt quicken me again,
and shalt bring me up again from the depths of the earth."*

— Psalm 71:20



They spent the rest of that day and the following one organizing the recovered material into a form Deputy DA Reyes could actually use — indexed, cross-referenced, every claim supported by the underlying document rather than simply asserted, the disciplined work of investigators who understood that even the most damning evidence accomplished nothing if it couldn't survive a defense attorney's scrutiny in open court.

"This is extraordinary work," Reyes said, when Bentley delivered the organized materials to her office two days later. "I want to be careful about promising you an immediate outcome, Mr. Blackwood, because I've learned painful lessons about promising outcomes in cases this large. But this gives my office, and the federal partners I intend to loop in by the end of this week, more than enough to justify a considerably larger investigation than anything we've pursued so far. The Denver connection alone opens an entirely new jurisdiction's worth of evidence we'll need to coordinate on."

"And Rachel's case?" Bentley asked quietly.

"I can't reopen a six-year-old closed case on the strength of a set of initials in a coded message, not on its own," Reyes said honestly. "But paired with the Foster pattern, paired with everything else in this file, I think there's a real path toward a formal reexamination. I won't promise you a timeline, Mr. Blackwood. I will promise you I understand exactly what this means to you personally, and I'm not going to let that history get lost in the larger case."

She studied him for a moment longer, her professional demeanor softening just slightly. "For what it's worth, I've prosecuted a fair number of cases where a grieving family member insisted, for years, that something didn't add up about a loved one's death, only to eventually be proven right once the technology or the evidence finally caught up to their instincts. I don't discount that kind of persistence, Mr. Blackwood. I've learned to take it seriously, even when the file in front of me isn't quite ready to support it yet."

Bentley called Pastor Grant that evening, driving back from Reyes's office with the growing dusk settling over the highway, and found the older man's voice carrying its familiar, unhurried steadiness even as Bentley described the Denver connection, the pattern too precise now to dismiss as anything but deliberate.

"I won't pretend to understand why God allows a pattern like that to exist at all, Mr. Blackwood," Grant said quietly, after a long silence. "I've walked with grieving people through that exact question for forty years, and I've never found an answer that fully satisfied either them or me. What I can tell you is this. You are closer tonight to understanding what happened to your wife than you have been in six years, and I don't believe that proximity arrived by accident, however painful the path to it has been. Sometimes the truth doesn't arrive gently. It arrives exactly when a person has finally become strong enough, and surrounded by enough good people, to carry the weight of finally receiving it."

*"He that walketh uprightly walketh surely: but he that perverteth his ways shall
be known."*

— **Proverbs 10:9**



That evening, back at the office, Bentley gathered every folder the investigation had produced over the preceding weeks — Emily's case, Rodriguez's murder, the Meridian break-in, the gala encounter, Rachel's reopened file, and now the flash drive's full contents — and spread

them across the central table in a single, sprawling display of everything three weeks of relentless work had uncovered.

"I want to consolidate this," he said, to the team gathered around him. "Not because any individual case is finished — Emily's recovering, Rodriguez's killers are still being prosecuted, Rachel's case is still, at best, only reopened rather than resolved. But everything we've found points back to the same source, the same man, the same pattern repeated across years and cities. I think it's time this stops being five separate files and becomes one."

He pulled a fresh folder from his desk drawer, thicker than any he had used before, and wrote across its tab in the same steady, deliberate handwriting he had used to label every case since he'd opened this agency six years earlier.

THE CROSS FILE.

"Everything goes in here from now on," he said. "Every lead, every case, every connection, no matter how small, no matter how long it takes to fully understand its significance. This is the investigation now. Everything else was simply the beginning of it."

He began transferring the individual entries by hand, one at a time, reading each aloud as he moved it into the new folder's growing order — the financial record with Damian Cross's own authorization signature, first uncovered through Meridian Systems Group. Marcus Vane's name from Emily's private notebook. The recovered audio of Emily's voice, quoting Scripture as she was forced into the vehicle. Rodriguez's murder and his final warning note. The Millbrook facility and everything recovered there. Diane Foster's name, added tonight for the first time, sitting now beside a case file that had waited six years for exactly this kind of company.

"Twenty pieces of evidence," Victoria observed quietly, watching the folder grow thicker with each addition. "Maybe more, once we finish indexing everything properly."

"It'll be more than twenty before this is finished," Bentley said. "I expect it'll be considerably more before any of us see the end of it. But every piece matters, Victoria. Every single one. That's precisely the point of building it this way rather than treating each discovery as its own isolated case."

"Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy: when I fall, I shall arise; when I sit in darkness, the LORD shall be a light unto me."

— Micah 7:8



Sarah studied the folder for a long moment, its tab still fresh, its contents already thicker than most cases the agency closed in a full year. "You understand what you're committing to, Bentley. This isn't a case with an ending anymore. This is a pursuit that might outlast every one of us sitting in this room tonight."

"I understand it," Bentley said. "I've understood it since the gala, the way Victoria told me weeks ago. I'm not asking any of you to commit to years the way I'm committing to them. But I am telling you, honestly, that I don't intend to close this folder until Damian Cross faces the same reckoning every person he's silenced has already faced without ever getting the chance to see it happen."

Mason looked at the folder, then at Bentley, and something settled behind his sharp, young eyes that Bentley recognized as a decision already made long before the words came. "I'm in for as long as it takes."

"So am I," Victoria said quietly.

"You already know where I stand," Sarah said, and there was no need for either of them to say anything further about it.

"There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— Luke 12:2

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A New Purpose

"I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."

— John 14:6

The Carter house in Millbrook was full to overflowing on the Sunday two weeks after Emily's rescue, extended family arriving from three states, neighbors bringing casseroles they left on the porch with notes rather than intruding on a homecoming they understood belonged, first and most fully, to the family itself. Bentley arrived in the early afternoon at Grace's specific invitation, feeling, as he climbed the porch steps, the particular strangeness of a man accustomed to leaving a case the moment its evidence was gathered, now standing at the threshold of something that had become considerably more personal than any investigation he had closed before it.

Emily met him in the doorway before he could knock, considerably stronger than the pale, exhausted woman he had carried out of a cold storage room two weeks earlier, color returned to her face, her eyes carrying a steadiness that told him, immediately, that whatever recovery still lay ahead of her, she had already begun the harder work of reclaiming herself from what had been taken.

"Mr. Blackwood," she said, and then, before he could offer any formal greeting in return, she embraced him with the same unguarded warmth Bentley imagined she extended to everyone she trusted completely. "I never got to properly thank you. Not the way I wanted to. Everything after that room was chaos, and hospitals, and reporters, and I don't think I said it clearly enough."

Frank appeared behind her a moment later, and where his first meeting with Bentley had carried the controlled, guarded wariness of a father protecting himself against false hope, this

greeting carried nothing held back at all. He gripped Bentley's hand and did not let go for a long moment, his eyes bright with an emotion he no longer bothered concealing.

"Twenty-six years on the force," Frank said, his voice rough. "I put a lot of bad men away in that time, Mr. Blackwood. I never once felt the particular kind of gratitude I feel standing here right now. You gave me my daughter back. There's no badge, no commendation, nothing this department or any department ever handed me that comes close to what that's worth."

"You never stopped believing her case deserved real attention," Bentley said. "That mattered more than you probably realize. Most families in your position eventually start doubting their own instincts when the people meant to help them keep telling them they're wrong. You never let that happen, not for a single day."

"Grace wouldn't have allowed it," Frank said, glancing back toward the house with open affection. "Twenty-eight years married to that woman, and I've learned it's a great deal easier to simply trust her instincts from the start than to spend weeks arguing my way back around to agreeing with her eventually."

"You don't owe me anything, Miss Carter."

"I know I don't owe you," Emily said, pulling back to look at him directly. "That's not why I'm saying it. Thank you. For believing my parents when everyone else told them not to. For following the trail I left even when it must have looked, at first, like the ordinary work of a woman who'd simply run away from her own life."

"He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

— Psalm 23:3



They sat together on the porch for a while, away from the noise and warmth of the crowded house, and Bentley found himself, without quite planning to, telling her more of the

investigation's full scope than he had originally intended to share with anyone still recovering from what she had survived — the flash drive's contents, the fourteen-state surveillance network, the bribery ledger, the coded initials that connected Damian Cross directly to the decision that had cost her three weeks of her freedom.

"Diane Foster," Emily said quietly, when he mentioned the Denver reporter's name. "I found her byline once, early in my research, before I understood what I was actually looking at. I remember thinking her death seemed strange, and then I got pulled into a hundred other threads and never followed up properly." She shook her head slowly. "I think about that sometimes. How many threads I never had time to follow. How many other people this company has silenced that we still don't know about."

"We'll find them," Bentley said. "It won't be quick. But we'll find them, one thread at a time, for as long as it takes."

Emily studied him for a long moment, something perceptive moving behind her steady eyes. "You've changed since the day you found me," she said. "I don't just mean the case. I mean you, specifically. There's something different in how you're talking about all of this."

"Old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."

— 2 Corinthians 5:17



"Pastor Grant would probably tell you exactly what's different," Bentley said, and found himself smiling, faintly, at the thought. "I've been reading my wife's Bible most nights for the last month. I couldn't have told you a year ago why I finally picked it back up. I'm not sure I can fully explain it now either, except that somewhere in the middle of this investigation, I stopped being able to hold onto the idea that everything worth trusting had to be something I could measure first."

"That sounds like faith to me," Emily said gently.

"Maybe," Bentley admitted. "I don't know if I'd call it that yet, not in the way you'd mean it, or the way your mother means it. I think I'm still somewhere in between the man I was and whatever I'm becoming. But I don't think I'm the same investigator who took this case three weeks ago pretending faith and evidence were enemies. I've learned, mostly from watching people like you and your parents, that they don't have to be."

Grace appeared in the doorway then, drawn by some instinct Bentley had come to recognize as entirely characteristic of her, and settled into the chair beside her daughter with the easy familiarity of a woman entirely at peace in her own home for the first time in over a month. "I've been praying for this exact conversation," she said, smiling at both of them. "Not the words of it, specifically. Just the fact of it happening at all."

"Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth."

— **John 17:17**



Pastor Grant found Bentley alone near the porch railing an hour later, the afternoon light softening toward evening, the sounds of the family's celebration still warm and steady behind them. He said nothing at first, simply stood beside Bentley in comfortable silence, the particular gift of a man who had spent forty years learning exactly when words helped and when they only got in the way.

"You've done something remarkable, Mr. Blackwood," Grant said finally. "I want you to hear that plainly, before I say anything else. Whatever else this investigation has cost you, and whatever it's still going to cost you before it's finished, you brought a missing woman home to a family who never stopped believing you would."

"I had help," Bentley said. "More help than I've ever accepted in my life, honestly. I built an entire career on the idea that I didn't need anyone else's faith in what I could accomplish alone. I don't think I believe that anymore."

"That's the beginning of wisdom, in my experience," Grant said. "Not the ending of it. The beginning." He turned to look at Bentley directly, his expression carrying the same patient gentleness Bentley had come to expect from him. "May I ask you something honestly, the way I asked you the first time we met?"

"Go ahead."

"Do you believe now?" Grant asked simply. "Not evidence, this time. Not a case you can build carefully enough to withstand scrutiny. I'm asking what you actually believe, in the quiet places evidence never fully reaches."

"Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."

— Mark 9:24



Bentley considered the question for a long time, longer than he had considered almost any question in the course of this entire investigation, watching the last of the afternoon light stretch gold and long across the Carters' front yard. He thought of Emily's recovered voice quoting Scripture to the men who had taken her. He thought of Rodriguez's final note, of Rachel's two Bibles worn thin at the same page, of Grace's steady insistence that faith and fear could occupy the same room without either one canceling out the other. He thought of a small leather Bible sitting, still, on the corner of his own desk, no longer entirely closed.

"I believe something," he said finally, choosing the words with the same care he gave to any statement he intended to stand behind fully. "I'm not ready to tell you I have the kind of certainty Grace has, or the kind Rachel had, or even the kind Emily seems to be rebuilding after everything she survived. But I believe there's more to what's true than what I can prove, Pastor Grant. I believe that now in a way I didn't three weeks ago, and I don't think that belief is going away, however long it takes me to fully understand what to do with it."

Grant was quiet for a moment, and when he spoke again, his voice carried something Bentley had not heard from him before — not triumph, not the satisfaction of a shepherd counting a recovered sheep, but simple, unhurried gladness. "That's not a small thing, Mr. Blackwood. I've sat with a great many people over forty years who never got that far, who spent their whole lives certain that certainty itself was the only acceptable form of faith. You've found something more honest than certainty tonight. You've found the beginning of trust. In my experience, that's usually where the truest kind of faith actually starts — not with an answer, but with a willingness to keep asking the question honestly, for as long as it takes."

"He that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."

— John 8:12



Bentley attended the small Millbrook church the following Sunday, sitting in a pew near the back beside Sarah, who had come without being asked, and watched Pastor Grant deliver a sermon that touched, without ever naming the case directly, on exactly the themes that had carried Bentley through the preceding weeks — hidden things eventually revealed, truth as both a comfort and a cost, the particular courage required to keep searching for something you couldn't yet prove existed.

"Faith," Grant said, near the sermon's close, his gaze sweeping the small congregation without settling anywhere in particular, "is not the absence of a question. It's the decision to keep walking toward an answer, trusting that the walking itself matters, even on the days the destination feels impossibly far away." He paused, and for a moment, Bentley felt certain the older man's eyes found his own across the modest sanctuary. "Some of you have been walking through a very hard season. I want you to hear this plainly. God has not lost track of you in it. He never loses track of anyone He's walking beside, however long the road, however dark the particular valley you're currently standing in."

Beside him, Sarah sang the closing hymn quietly, her voice carrying the particular rustiness of someone rediscovering words she had not spoken aloud in a long time, and Bentley found himself watching her rather than the hymnal in his own hands, understanding, for the first time with real clarity, that this journey had never belonged to him alone. Sarah had stood beside him through six years of grief long before this case ever began, had driven forty minutes to sit with him in a parking lot on his worst night, had walked into a burning building beside him without a single moment's hesitation. Whatever this church, this pew, this quiet reclamation of something he'd abandoned meant to him, it had been made possible, in no small part, by a friendship that had never once wavered even when he'd given her every reason to walk away from it.

Bentley sat with that through the closing hymn, through the quiet murmur of the congregation filing out into the bright autumn afternoon, and found himself, for the first time in six years, unable to fully explain the particular peace that had settled over him — not resolution, not an ending to any of the grief he still carried, but something steadier than he had expected faith to feel, something closer to companionship than conviction.

"The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day."

— **Proverbs 4:18**



He drove to Rachel's grave that same afternoon, alone, the small photocopied page from her Bible still folded in his jacket pocket where he had carried it since the night before the raid, and stood beneath the maple tree in the particular quiet that had, over the preceding weeks, become less a place of dread and more a place of ongoing, unfinished conversation.

"I prayed today," he said, and found that saying it aloud carried none of the awkwardness he had expected. "Actually prayed, Rachel. Not the desperate bargaining I did in the hospital

corridor the night you died, and not the silence I've kept ever since. An actual prayer, sitting in a pew in Grace Carter's church, asking God to help me finish what this case has started, and asking Him, honestly, to help me forgive myself for every year I spent refusing to believe He was still there at all."

He was quiet for a long moment, listening to the wind move through the maple's changing leaves, before he continued.

"I don't know how long the rest of this is going to take. I don't know if I'll ever get the full answer about what happened to you, or whether Diane Foster's death will ever fully connect to yours in a way a courtroom would accept. But I know I'm not walking through any of it alone anymore, and I know, somehow, that you'd be glad about that, even if it took me six years longer than it should have to finally believe it."

*"For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life... shall be able to separate us
from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

— Romans 8:38



He gathered the team back at Larkspur Street that evening, the office quiet in the particular way it had grown quiet after every major turn in the investigation, and found himself, for the first time since opening the agency six years earlier, speaking to them not about evidence or strategy but about what the work itself had come to mean.

"I built this agency because I didn't know what else to do with the person I'd become after Rachel died," he said. "I told myself I was solving cases because solving cases was the only thing that still made sense to me. I think that was true, for a while. But I don't think it's true anymore, and I wanted to say that plainly, to all of you, because I think each of you has become part of the reason it isn't true."

Mason looked up from his monitors, something uncharacteristically quiet in his expression. "So what is it now, if it's not just solving cases?"

Victoria answered before Bentley could, her voice carrying an unusual openness of its own. "I've spent eleven years studying why people do terrible things to each other, Mason. I came to this agency because Bentley offered me a chance to use that understanding for something better than simply cataloguing cruelty after the fact. I think what's happened over these last few weeks has clarified something I always suspected but never fully named — that understanding evil isn't the same as defeating it. Defeating it requires people willing to keep showing up, case after case, year after year, even when the win looks smaller than the cost."

"That's a very Victoria way of saying 'I'm in too,'" Mason said, and something in his tone had lightened, though the sentiment beneath it remained entirely sincere. "For the record, I never had a family like the Carters growing up. Foster homes, mostly, a few good ones and a lot that weren't. I think some part of me has been looking for exactly this — people worth trusting, a fight worth staying in — since long before I ever hacked that first database." He looked around the office, at the whiteboard and the monitors and the central table that had become, over these weeks, something closer to a second home than a workplace. "I'm not going anywhere, Bentley. Not until this is finished, however long that takes."

Bentley considered the question, thinking of Grant's sermon, of Emily's steady recovery, of Grace's unshakeable faith and Frank's stubborn love, of a folder growing thicker on his desk with every case that touched the same patient, resourced evil. "I think it's become a pursuit of something bigger than any single case," he said finally. "Justice, certainly. But something underneath justice too — the conviction that truth matters enough to keep chasing it, even when chasing it costs more than any reasonable person would choose to pay. I don't think I could have told you that three weeks ago and meant it. I mean it now."

"What doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

— Micah 6:8



Late that night, alone in his apartment, Bentley opened the small cedar box one final time and returned Rachel's notebook to its place beside her letters, no longer locked away out of grief but kept, deliberately, as a reminder of exactly how far this pursuit had already carried him and exactly how far it likely still had to go. He picked up his own Bible from the corner of his desk, the one his mother had given him decades earlier, and for the first time since Grant's visit weeks ago, he opened it without hesitation, without the careful, testing reluctance that had marked every previous reading.

He read late into the night, and found, somewhere in the quiet hours before sleep finally claimed him, that he no longer felt the need to keep faith and evidence in separate rooms of his own understanding. They had become, somewhere in the course of this extraordinary investigation, two instruments in the same steady hand, each one measuring something the other could not fully reach on its own.

"There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— Luke 12:2

CHAPTER TWENTY

The First Clue

"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."

— Philippians 1:6

A full month after Frank and Grace Carter first walked through the door of Blackwood Investigations, Bentley Blackwood sat alone in his office on a quiet Tuesday evening, closing out the paperwork on the case that had, in the span of thirty days, reshaped nearly every certainty he had built his adult life around. The missing-person case was solved. Emily Carter was home, healing, already speaking with Priya Anand about a follow-up article she intended to write once she felt strong enough to hold a pen against a story again. Raymond Calloway's shoulder had healed well enough that he'd returned to work, his daughter safely beside him every evening. The six men arrested at the Millbrook facility faced charges that would keep at least two of them in state custody for years, and Deputy DA Reyes's office had, only that morning, formally requested federal partnership on the Denver connection.

By any conventional measure, the case was closed. Bentley had found what he was hired to find. He had brought a missing woman home to parents who had never stopped believing he would, and in the process, had recovered enough evidence to reshape an investigation into a company that had operated, for years, entirely beyond the reach of anyone brave enough to look closely at what it had built.

And yet, sitting alone in the quiet of his office that evening, Bentley understood with complete clarity that nothing about this case had actually ended at all.

"Let us run with patience the race that is set before us."

— **Hebrews 12:1**



He rose from his desk and crossed to the locked steel cabinet in the corner of the office, a piece of furniture he had purchased years earlier for evidence too sensitive to leave in an ordinary filing drawer, and had used, until this case, perhaps twice in six years of running the agency. He opened it now and began, carefully, methodically, transferring the physical evidence that had accumulated over the preceding month — Emily's decoded journal, the recovered flash

drive's printed contents, the financial ledger implicating seventeen public officials across four states, the coded communications bearing Damian Cross's own initials, photographs from the Millbrook facility, and beneath all of it, at the very bottom of the growing collection, Rachel's own case file, no longer locked away in a separate drawer but placed, deliberately, alongside everything else that had finally begun to make sense of her death.

He paused before closing the cabinet, looking at the accumulated weight of thirty days' work laid out before him — evidence that had cost a witness his freedom, a source his life, and very nearly cost Emily Carter everything she had. He thought of Rodriguez's final note, carried into a meeting he had known might kill him rather than remain hidden. He thought of Diane Foster, a woman he had never met, whose death three years earlier had waited patiently in a Denver archive for someone finally willing to connect it to a pattern too precise to be coincidence.

"To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven."

— Ecclesiastes 3:1



He thought, too, of everyone who had walked through this investigation beside him — Sarah, who had never once let him carry it alone even when he'd insisted he could. Victoria, whose patient, careful mind had turned fragments into patterns too many times to count. Mason, who had traded a childhood full of systems that failed him for a career spent making sure other people's failures didn't go unanswered. Pastor Grant, who had asked him questions no one else had thought to ask, and had waited, without pressure, for Bentley to find his own way toward the answers. And beneath all of it, Rachel — present in every decision, every late night, every moment Bentley had chosen to keep going rather than let this case become one more unanswered question buried in a locked drawer.

He locked the cabinet and returned to his desk, where the growing folder labeled THE CROSS FILE sat waiting, its tab worn now from handling, its contents thick enough that he had needed to reinforce the folder itself with a second layer of cardstock simply to keep it from splitting along its spine. He opened it one final time that evening, turning past the index Victoria had carefully built, past the financial trails Mason had painstakingly traced, past Sarah's meticulous documentation of every witness statement and every piece of corroborating evidence the team had gathered, until he reached the single sheet of paper where this entire pursuit had formally begun.

THE CROSS INVESTIGATION. Financial record — Damian Cross signature authorization code — Meridian Systems Group acquisition — connects to Sycamore St. garage access.

He read the line again, remembering the particular quiet satisfaction he had felt writing it a month earlier, before he understood even a fraction of what it would eventually grow to encompass. He thought of Damian Cross's pale, steady eyes across a gala ballroom, of a man utterly convinced that control was a form of love, that watching the world closely enough was the same thing as saving it. He thought of the man's own words, delivered with such calm, reasonable confidence. I don't get many opponents worth the effort of watching closely anymore.

"You'll get considerably more than you bargained for," Bentley said quietly, to the empty office, to a name written now across dozens of pages in his own steady hand. "I promise you that."

"I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith."

— 2 Timothy 4:7



Sarah found him there an hour later, letting herself in with the key he'd given her weeks earlier without either of them ever formally discussing the significance of the gesture, and set

two cups of coffee down on the desk between them without comment, the way she had done a hundred times before across eleven years of partnership.

"You're doing the thing again," she said, settling into the chair across from him. "The one where you sit alone with a case file long after everyone else has gone home, trying to memorize every line of it before you'll let yourself close it for the night."

"Old habit," Bentley admitted.

"A useful one, most of the time." Sarah studied him for a long moment, her expression carrying the particular warmth of someone who had watched a difficult man become, slowly and against considerable resistance, a slightly less difficult one. "How does it feel? Closing the case that isn't actually closed."

Bentley considered the question honestly, turning it over the way he turned over every question that mattered. "Strange," he said finally. "A month ago, I would have told you closure meant an ending — a clean line between the work and whatever came after it. I don't think I believe in that kind of closure anymore. I think some cases don't end so much as they become the beginning of the next one, and the next one, for as long as it takes to finally reach the bottom of what they're hiding."

*"They that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up
with wings as eagles."*

— **Isaiah 40:31**



"Mason ran the numbers this afternoon," Sarah said, sliding a printed summary across the desk. "Just for his own curiosity, he says, though I suspect it was more than curiosity. Fourteen states with confirmed Eye deployment. Seventeen bribed officials we've identified so far, with more likely still hidden. Two deaths we can now connect with reasonable confidence — Diane Foster and Rachel — and Mason thinks, based on patterns in the coded communications, there

may be others we haven't found yet. This isn't a case anymore, Bentley. It's an ecosystem. Cross built something that reaches into more corners of this country than either of us fully understood when we started."

"I know," Bentley said. "I think I've known it since the gala, if I'm honest. Maybe since the moment Grace Carter told me nothing stays hidden from God, no matter how carefully a man builds his walls." He looked down at the thick folder in front of him, at Damian Cross's name written across its opening page in his own patient hand. "This isn't going to be finished in a year, Sarah. Maybe not in five. I don't know how long it's actually going to take."

"Does that frighten you?"

Bentley thought about the question for a long moment, thinking of Rachel's steady faith, of Emily's courage quoted through eleven degraded seconds of audio, of Rodriguez's final note about choosing to trust something larger than his own fear. "It did, three weeks ago," he said finally. "I don't think it does anymore. I think I've stopped needing to see the whole road before I'm willing to keep walking it."

"And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not."

— Galatians 6:9



He called Frank and Grace Carter before he left the office that night, a habit he had continued even after the case's formal conclusion, understanding that some relationships forged under this kind of pressure did not simply end because the immediate danger had passed.

"We're doing well," Grace told him, her voice warm and steady over the line. "Emily's talking about going back to work part-time next month. Frank's been teaching her to shoot at the range twice a week, not that either of us thinks it'll come to that again, but he says it makes him

feel useful, and I've learned not to argue with whatever helps a father feel useful after everything." A pause, and then, gently: "How are you, Mr. Blackwood? Genuinely."

"Better than I've been in six years," Bentley admitted, and found the words carried none of the discomfort they might have carried a month earlier. "I don't fully understand everything that's changed in me yet, Mrs. Carter. But I know this case gave me back something I'd stopped believing I was allowed to have."

"I've been praying for exactly that," Grace said simply, "since the very first afternoon you sat across that desk from Frank and me, looking like a man who'd forgotten how to hope for anything he couldn't personally verify first. I'm glad it worked. I don't say that to take credit, Mr. Blackwood. I say it because I want you to know you were never as alone in any of this as you believed you were."

*"For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the
midst of them."*

— **Matthew 18:20**



Forty floors above the city that same evening, in an office considerably larger and considerably quieter than the one Bentley had just left, Damian Cross stood at his own window, watching the lights of Ashford Falls flicker on against the gathering dusk, a glass of water untouched on the desk behind him. His public statement had bought him time, exactly as he'd intended it to. His lawyers were already filing the first of what would become, over the following months, an extraordinary volume of procedural delay. His board remained loyal, for now, reassured by a stock price already climbing back toward its pre-scandal value.

But Marcus Vane had not resurfaced, despite the generous severance quietly wired to an account even Cross's own security team had struggled to trace, and something about that silence troubled him more than he allowed himself to show to anyone still reporting to him. And there

was the matter of the investigator — Blackwood — a man who had proven, against every projection Cross's own analysts had built, considerably more dangerous than a private detective operating out of a converted warehouse had any right to be.

"Pull his file again," Cross said quietly, to the empty room, to no one, the same unhurried patience in his voice that had built an empire out of a two-room office and a mother's small loan fourteen years earlier. "Every case he's ever closed. Every person he's ever trusted. If he intends to spend years chasing me, I intend to know exactly which of those years will cost him the most to spend."

He turned from the window at last, and behind him, the city's lights continued their steady, indifferent glow, unaware of the two men — one watching from a tower built on control, the other working late in a small brick office built on something considerably harder to buy — who had each, in their own way, just committed themselves to a war that would take twenty years to finish.

"Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it?"

— **Isaiah 43:19**



Bentley drove home slowly that night, through streets he now understood, with a clarity that no longer troubled him the way it once had, were watched more closely than most of their residents would ever fully know — not only by Damian Cross's quiet, patient machinery, but by something considerably older and steadier than any surveillance network a man could build, however sophisticated its reach.

He climbed the stairs to his apartment, poured himself the coffee he hadn't finished at the office, and sat for a long while at his kitchen table with both Bibles open in front of him — his mother's, and Rachel's, side by side for the first time since he'd inherited the second one, their

pages worn thin in different places by two people who had each found their own way to the same steady truth.

He thought of Pastor Grant's words from the church pew weeks earlier. Faith is not the absence of a question. It's the decision to keep walking toward an answer, trusting that the walking itself matters. He thought of a verse Emily had underlined in blue ink so many times the paper had gone soft, a verse that had followed this entire investigation from its very first hour to this quiet, uncertain, hopeful evening.

He opened his notebook — not the Cross File, but the smaller, private journal he had begun keeping in the weeks since Grant's first visit — and wrote a single entry, the last of that long and transformative month.

Case File: The Cross Investigation. The missing witness has been found. The greater mystery has only begun. I don't know how many years this will take, or how many more names like Diane Foster's and Rachel's I'll uncover before it's finished. But I know now that I'm not searching alone, and I know that nothing Damian Cross has built — no matter how patiently, no matter how thoroughly — will stay covered forever.

"For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— **Luke 12:2**



Twenty years, though Bentley Blackwood could not yet know it that quiet autumn evening, still lay ahead of him — twenty years of cases that would each, in their own way, add another piece to the file growing thicker in the locked cabinet of his office, twenty years of chasing a name that would prove, again and again, harder to catch than any adversary he had faced before. He would lose people along the way. He would find others he never expected to need. He would learn the full truth about Rachel's death in a season still years away, in

circumstances he could not yet imagine, and he would learn it not because he finally proved skilled enough to force the truth into the open alone, but because he had finally become willing to let others carry the weight of the search alongside him. And somewhere at the end of that long road, though he could not have imagined it yet, a courtroom would finally hold the man who had spent his life watching everyone else, and would ask him, at last, to answer for everything he had hidden.

None of that had happened yet. Tonight, there was only a locked cabinet, a growing folder, a small brick office on Larkspur Street, and a man who had finally stopped believing he had to face the darkness entirely on his own.

For now, he closed both Bibles gently, set the pocket watch beside them on the table, and allowed himself, for the first time in longer than he could calculate, the quiet and unguarded rest of a man who had finally stopped insisting he had to carry everything alone.

The hunt for Damian Cross had only just begun. And for the first time in six years, Bentley Blackwood was no longer afraid of how long the road ahead might be.

"For with the LORD there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption. And he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities."

— Psalm 130:7

EPILOGUE

The Next File

"While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal."

— 2 Corinthians 4:18

Six weeks after Emily Carter walked out of the Millbrook facility on her own two feet, she stood at a podium in the fellowship hall of Grace Community Church, holding three index cards she had written on and rewritten a dozen times, and found she did not need them at all.

"I used to think the most important thing a journalist could do was find the truth," she said, her voice steadier than she expected it to be. "I still believe that. But I spent eleven days in the dark believing I might die before anyone read a word of what I'd found, and somewhere in that darkness I learned something I don't think I could have learned any other way. Finding the truth isn't the finish line. It's just the beginning of what you do with it." She looked out at the room — her parents in the second row, Frank's arm around Grace's shoulders, both of them crying the way people cry when the thing they prayed for finally, impossibly, arrives. "I don't know how long it will take to finish what I started. I don't know how many more people like the ones who helped me will have to risk everything before it's over. But I know now that I'm not finishing it alone. None of us are."

She had not planned to say that last part. It had simply arrived, the way true things sometimes do, and when she stepped down from the podium her mother met her halfway across the room and held her the way she had held her the night she came home — like a woman who intended never to let go of anything again.

Isaiah 26:3 was the verse Pastor Grant had chosen for the morning's reading, and Emily had copied it into the front of a new journal the week before, the first entry in a book that did not yet contain a single word about Cross Global Technologies, Damian Cross, or The Eye.

"Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee."

— **Isaiah 26:3**



Two days later, on a Tuesday morning that felt, for the first time in over a month, almost ordinary, Sarah Whitmore let herself into Blackwood Investigations without knocking, dropped a manila folder on Bentley's desk, and sat down across from him without being invited.

"You're going to want to see this," she said.

Bentley set down the coffee he'd been nursing since six that morning. "Cross's lawyers again?"

"Cross's lawyers are the least interesting part of my morning," Sarah said. "This came through a contact of mine in Colville County — that's four hundred miles northwest of here, small county, not the kind of place that usually makes anyone's radar. A woman named Renata Cho went missing eleven days ago. Investigative reporter. Local paper, not a big outfit, but she'd been digging into a municipal contracting deal that smells almost exactly like Ridgeline. Same shell-company architecture. Same offshore routing. The county sheriff up there is treating it as a voluntary disappearance, the same way Detective Ruiz treated Emily's case before we forced the issue."

Bentley was quiet for a long moment, looking down at the thin folder Sarah had brought him — three printed pages, a photograph of a woman in her thirties with dark, serious eyes, and a name he had never heard before this moment and suspected he would not soon forget.

"You think it's connected," he said. It wasn't a question.

"I think," Sarah said carefully, "that Mason ran a pattern search two nights ago, mostly out of curiosity, cross-referencing every municipal-contracting fraud case reported in the last five years against shell-company signatures we recovered from the Cross File. He found eleven matches, Bentley. Eleven counties, eleven towns, spread across nine states, all with the same fingerprints buried in different names." She leaned forward. "Colville County is just the one where somebody's gone missing this week. It might not be the last."

Bentley thought of Frank and Grace Carter walking through his door thirty seconds before what should have been a routine morning, and of how completely that ordinary Tuesday had rearranged the rest of his life. He thought of Emily's voice on the recording Mason had

recovered, steady even at its most degraded moments — I found something. Whether we like it or not, I found something. He thought of the pocket watch in his desk drawer, stopped forever at 6:47, and of how long it had taken him to stop believing that carrying every burden alone was the only kind of faithfulness that counted.

"Get me everything Mason has on Colville County," he said. "And find out who's handling victim advocacy for Renata Cho's family. If nobody's called them back yet, I want to be the one who does."

"Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you."

— 1 Peter 5:7



Forty stories above a different city entirely, Damian Cross stood at the window of an office that had been rebuilt twice in eleven years and redecorated each time to look as though nothing in it had ever needed rebuilding, and listened to a report he had already decided, before it finished, that he did not like.

"The Colville deployment is compromised," said the man delivering it — not Marcus Vane, who had not answered a secure line in six days and whose silence Cross had stopped trying to interpret charitably, but a younger operative named Foster Aldrich who had inherited the account with the particular nervousness of a man who understood exactly what had happened to his predecessor's predecessor. "Cho got further than we projected. If Blackwood's people connect Colville to the Cross File before the county contract closes—"

"They will," Cross said, without turning from the window. "Blackwood connects things. It's the one skill I've never managed to account for in any of my projections." He watched the lights of the city arrange themselves into patterns he had once found beautiful and now mostly found useful, a lattice of intersections he had spent eleven years learning to read the way other men read weather. "Pause Colville. Not cancel — pause. Move the operational weight to the

three deployments furthest from anything Blackwood's firm has touched, and make certain none of them share so much as a comma of shell-company language with what he's already found. We miscalculated once by assuming redundancy meant safety. We will not miscalculate the same way twice."

Foster Aldrich hesitated. "And Renata Cho?"

For the first time since the report began, Cross turned from the window. "Renata Cho," he said, "is not my problem to solve. She's a problem the county created for itself by hiring people who don't understand discretion. I am not in the business of making problems disappear, Mr. Aldrich. I am in the business of making certain they were never mine to begin with." He returned his attention to the window, to the city, to the eleven years of architecture spread out beneath him like a puzzle only he had ever fully assembled. "Blackwood thinks he's found the edges of something. Let him keep thinking that a while longer. A man who believes he's mapped the whole of a thing stops looking for what's still hidden."

*"This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that
God is light, and in him is no darkness at all."*

— 1 John 1:5



Bentley worked late that night, long after Sarah had gone home and the streetlights on Larkspur Street had taken over from the sun. He read through the three pages on Renata Cho twice, then a third time, and found himself doing something he had not done on the first night of Emily Carter's case — he bowed his head before he opened a fresh folder, and he prayed, plainly and without eloquence, for a woman he had never met and a family he had not yet called.

When he finished, he took a black marker from his top drawer, uncapped it, and wrote a single name across the tab of a new manila folder: COLVILLE COUNTY. Beneath it, after a

moment's thought, he added a second line, smaller, the way he had once labeled the very first file that had ever changed the direction of his life: THE EYE — PART II.

He set the folder beside the locked cabinet where the Cross File waited, thick and growing, and looked at the two of them together for a long time — the case that was finished, and the one that had just begun.

"Eleven counties," he said quietly, to the empty office, to the photograph of Rachel still turned toward his desk, to whatever else might be listening in the dark. "Eleven, and probably more we haven't found yet." He thought of Pastor Grant's words from a night that felt, now, like it belonged to a different man entirely — the truth doesn't need you to carry it alone, Bentley, it needs you to carry it faithfully — and for the first time since Frank and Grace Carter had first walked through his door, he found he could hold both truths at once without either one crushing him: that the work was far from finished, and that he was not the only one still doing it.

Somewhere north of the city, in a county most Americans could not have located on a map, a family was about to receive a phone call they had been dreading and hoping for in equal measure. Somewhere forty stories above a different skyline, a man who believed himself untouchable was recalculating the shape of his own carefully built kingdom. And somewhere on Larkspur Street, in a small brick office that had seen more grief and more grace in six weeks than in the six years before it, a private investigator closed one folder, opened another, and began, once again, to watch for what had been hidden.

The Eye had been watching for a long time. It was only now beginning to understand that it, too, was being watched.

"For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— **Luke 12:2**

A Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up **Private Eyes: They're Watching You: Book One—The Missing Witness**.

As an author, I have always enjoyed a good mystery. There is something captivating about following a detective through a maze of clues, suspects, and unexpected twists until the truth is finally revealed. But as much as I enjoy writing suspense, I have come to realize that the greatest truths in life are not found at the end of a criminal investigation—they are found in the pages of God's Word.

This series was written to combine the excitement of a detective thriller with the eternal hope of the Gospel.

Bentley Blackwood is a gifted investigator. He notices details that everyone else overlooks. He can solve crimes, uncover conspiracies, and expose deception. Yet, like so many people, he begins this journey carrying wounds that evidence cannot heal and questions that logic alone cannot answer.

Perhaps you know what that feels like.

Many people spend their lives searching for answers. We search for success, happiness, security, acceptance, or purpose. We investigate every path the world offers, hoping that somewhere we will discover what has been missing. Yet the greatest discovery anyone can ever make is that true peace is found in a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Throughout this twenty-book series, Bentley will solve one case after another. Every mystery will be resolved. Every criminal will leave behind a clue. Every investigation will uncover another piece of evidence leading toward the greatest case of Bentley's career—the pursuit of Damian Cross.

But beneath the action and suspense is another investigation taking place.

God is patiently working in Bentley's heart.

As Bentley searches for truth, God is drawing him toward **the Truth**.

That is my prayer for every reader as well.

The world we live in grows more connected every day. Technology continues to advance at an astonishing pace. Cameras watch our streets. Digital systems track our activities. Artificial intelligence is reshaping how we work, communicate, and live. While these developments provide a fascinating backdrop for fiction, they also remind us of a far greater reality.

Nothing has ever escaped God's notice.

Long before satellites filled the sky and surveillance cameras lined our cities, Scripture declared that the Lord sees every heart, knows every thought, and understands every motive. That truth should both humble and encourage us. We never face life's struggles alone, and evil will never have the final word.

One verse serves as the foundation of this entire series:

"For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; neither hid, that shall not be known."

— Luke 12:2

No conspiracy remains hidden forever.

No lie lasts forever.

No injustice escapes God's attention.

His truth will always prevail.

As you read this first adventure, I hope you'll enjoy the suspense, the investigations, and the surprises waiting around every corner. I also hope you'll see that every chapter points beyond the mystery itself to the faithfulness of God, whose justice is perfect, whose mercy is abundant, and whose love is available to all who trust in His Son.

Thank you for investing your time in this story. It is a privilege to share it with you.

May this book entertain you, challenge you, and remind you that even in a world filled with deception, there is still absolute truth—and His name is Jesus Christ.

I invite you to join Bentley Blackwood on this journey through all twenty investigations. The clues have only begun to surface, and the greatest mystery is still waiting to be solved.

May God richly bless you.

In Christ,

Dr. Paul Crawford

PRIVATE EYES: THEY'RE WATCHING YOU

BOOK ONE: THE MISSING WITNESS

Everyone sees the crime.
Only one person saw the truth.

Bentley Blackwood, former FBI analyst turned private investigator, handles impossible cases—missing persons, cold leads, hidden truths. But one mystery remains unsolved: his own faith, shattered by a past tragedy.

Now, investigative journalist Emily Carter vanishes hours before exposing a vast corporate surveillance empire, leaving behind a subtle trail of clues and an open Bible marked at Luke 12:2.

As Blackwood investigates, he is drawn into a world of hidden eyes, where faith and logic collide. From a powerful technology mogul with a philosophy of control, to a spiritual guide, each piece of evidence challenges his beliefs. What if there are truths beyond proof? Discover the mystery that begins the journey.

A detective searches for evidence. A believer searches for meaning. Sometimes, God provides both.

“Private Eyes” starts a series that explores the truth behind the shadows.

By Dr. Paul Crawford

