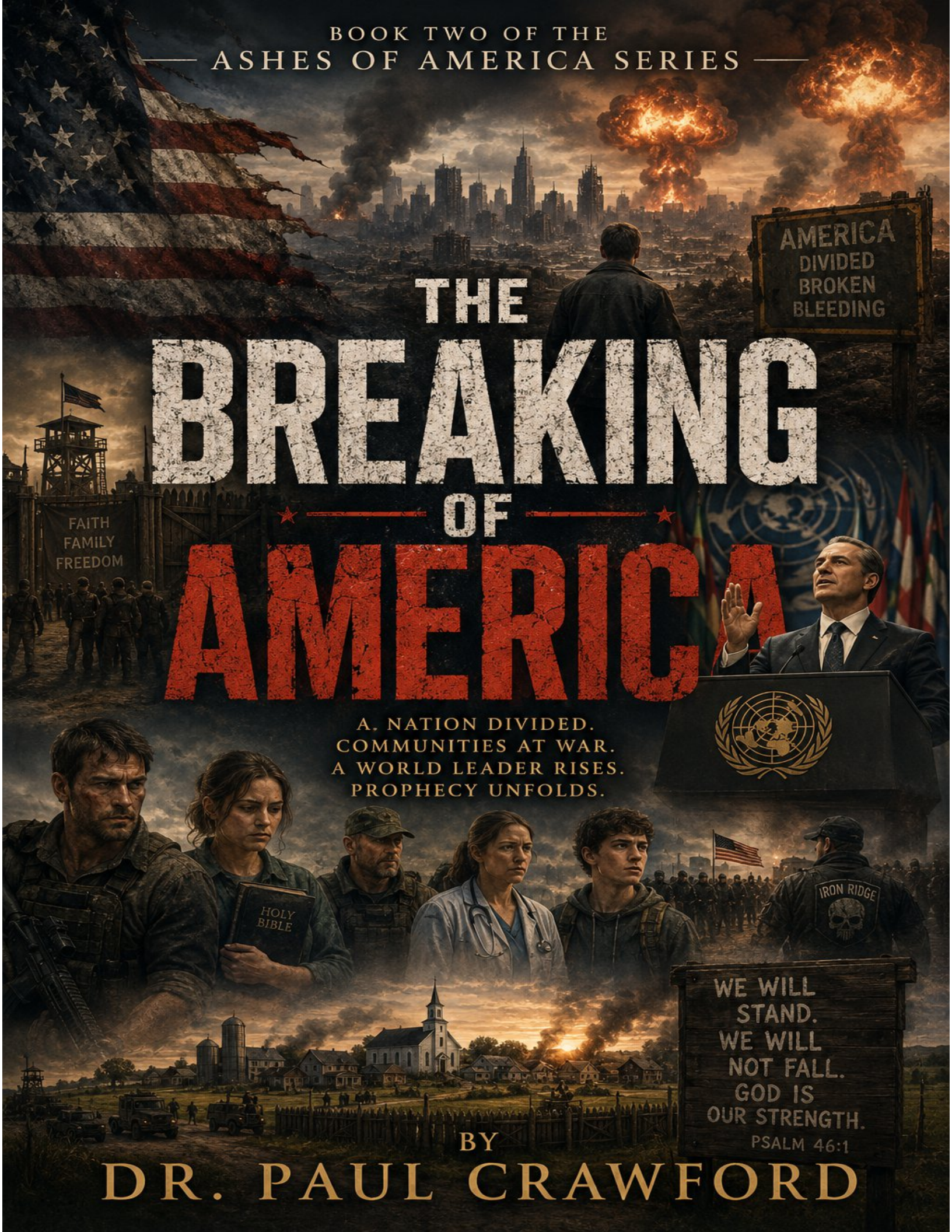

BOOK TWO OF THE
ASHES OF AMERICA SERIES
AMERICA
DIVIDED
BROKEN
BLEEDING
THE
BREAKING
OF
AMERICA
FAITH
FAMILY
FREEDOM
A NATION DIVIDED.
COMMUNITIES AT WAR.
A WORLD LEADER RISES.
PROPHECY UNFOLDS.
HOLY
BIBLE
IRON RIDGE
WE WILL
STAND.
WE WILL
NOT FALL.
GOD IS
OUR STRENGTH.
PSALM 46:1
BY
DR. PAUL CRAWFORD

THE BREAKING OF AMERICA

Book Two of the Ashes of America Series

By Dr. Paul Crawford

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In Ashwood, Rebecca Whitfield opens her father's Bible to the book of Daniel while Ethan Walker reads aloud from Revelation.

The room falls silent.

They have survived the collapse of America.

Now they must face something far greater.

The rise of a global kingdom.

The story continues in Book Three: The New Order.

PREFACE

There are moments in history when nations change slowly.

And there are moments when everything changes at once.

In After the Vanishing, the first book of the Ashes of America Series, the world was shaken by an event unlike anything humanity had ever experienced. Millions vanished in a single moment. Families were torn apart. Churches were emptied. Governments were thrown into confusion. Then, before the world could recover, nuclear attacks devastated twenty-three American cities and shattered what remained of normal life.

But destruction does not always come from bombs.

Sometimes a nation is destroyed from within.

That is where The Breaking of America begins.

Six months have passed since the Rapture, and the country that once called itself the United States is beginning to disappear. The flag may still fly in some places. Government officials may still issue statements. Military commanders may still claim authority. But the nation itself is breaking into pieces.

Cities are isolated.

States are collapsing.

Communities are building their own armies.

Food has become more valuable than money.

Medicine has become more precious than gold.

County lines have become borders.

Neighbors have become enemies.

And ordinary people are being forced to make extraordinary decisions simply to survive.

At the center of this story is Ashwood, Ohio.

Ashwood is not important because of its size. It has no great military installation. It has no powerful government. It has no vast stockpile of weapons or supplies.

It is important because of the people who live there.

They are farmers, teachers, police officers, doctors, veterans, mechanics, parents, teenagers, widows, and ordinary citizens who never imagined that one day they would be defending their homes against armed armies from neighboring towns.

They are also people learning what faith means when comfort is gone.

The believers of Ashwood are discovering that Christianity is more than something practiced inside a church building on Sunday morning.

Faith becomes very different when there is no electricity.

When there is no police department coming to help.

When there is no hospital capable of treating the wounded.

When the grocery shelves are empty.

When armed men are standing outside the town.

When friends are dying.

When the future appears hopeless.

In circumstances like these, people discover what they truly believe.

Some will surrender their convictions in exchange for safety.

Some will trade freedom for protection.

Some will become cruel because cruelty appears necessary for survival.

Some will betray friends in order to save themselves.

But others will discover a courage they never knew they possessed.

And some will finally understand that hope was never found in government, wealth, security, military strength, or human institutions.

True hope has always been found in Jesus Christ.

That truth stands at the center of The Breaking of America.

This story is not merely about the collapse of a nation.

It is about the condition of the human heart when everything familiar has been stripped away.

Throughout history, people have often believed that civilization itself keeps evil under control. Laws, governments, police departments, courts, schools, churches, and social expectations create boundaries that hold society together.

But what happens when those boundaries disappear?

What happens when there is no longer anyone to enforce the law?

What happens when survival becomes the only rule many people recognize?

Some characters in this story will choose mercy.

Others will choose power.

Some will protect the weak.

Others will exploit them.

Some will serve.

Others will rule.

And those choices will reveal who they truly are.

Marcus Kane represents one of the most dangerous ideas that can arise during times of crisis—the belief that survival justifies absolute power.

He offers security.

He promises order.

He provides protection.

But every promise comes with a price.

Freedom must be surrendered.

Loyalty must be absolute.

Opposition cannot be tolerated.

In a frightened world, such leadership can appear attractive.

History has repeatedly demonstrated that frightened people may willingly surrender liberties they would never give away during peaceful times.

That struggle between liberty and security forms one of the central conflicts of this book.

But while America is breaking apart, something much larger is happening beyond its borders.

A new international leader is rising.

He speaks of peace.

He promises unity.

He coordinates relief.

He appears capable of accomplishing what no other leader can.

The starving receive food.

Hostile nations negotiate.

Trade begins again.

Communication is restored.

A frightened world begins believing that one man may hold the answer to humanity's problems.

To millions, he appears to be hope.

But to those who have begun studying the Scriptures, his rise raises troubling questions.

The believers of Ashwood are beginning to understand that the events around them are not random.

Pastor Caleb Whitfield warned about these days before he disappeared.

His sermons remain.

His handwritten notes remain.

His Bible studies remain.

And through those messages, a pastor who is no longer physically present continues preaching to people he never expected would one day listen.

That theme is especially important to me.

The Word of God continues speaking long after the voice of the preacher grows silent.

A sermon faithfully preached may be heard years later.

A Bible study written in an ordinary notebook may someday strengthen someone going through extraordinary circumstances.

A verse shared with a child may return to their memory decades later.

We rarely know how God may use something spoken, written, taught, or shared in faithfulness.

In The Breaking of America, Pastor Whitfield's ministry continues after his disappearance because the truth he preached was never dependent upon him.

It was dependent upon God's Word.

As you read this book, you will see Ethan Walker continue to grow into a leader he never wanted to become.

You will see Rebecca Whitfield begin carrying the spiritual legacy of her father.

You will watch Jack Reynolds prepare ordinary citizens for a battle that seems impossible to win.

You will stand beside Dr. Sarah Collins as she attempts to practice medicine in conditions resembling another century.

You will watch Noah Simmons grow from a frightened teenager into a young man willing to speak openly about Christ.

You will also meet new characters—some who bring hope, some who bring warnings, and some whose arrival will change the direction of the series.

The people in this story are fictional.

Ashwood is fictional.

The battles are fictional.

But the spiritual questions are very real.

What would remain if everything you depended upon disappeared?

What would you believe if society collapsed around you?

Would fear determine your choices?

Would survival become more important than conviction?

Would you compromise truth for security?

Would you still trust God when obedience became dangerous?

Those questions do not belong only in a fictional Tribulation story.

They belong in every generation.

Christian faith has never promised that believers will avoid hardship.

Scripture repeatedly teaches the opposite.

There will be trials.

There will be persecution.

There will be suffering.

There will be moments when faithfulness carries a cost.

But Scripture also teaches something greater.

God remains faithful.

His Word remains true.

His grace remains sufficient.

And no darkness is strong enough to extinguish the light of Christ.

That is the message I hope remains with you long after the final page of this book.

The Breaking of America is darker than the first novel because the world itself is becoming darker.

The danger is greater.

The losses are heavier.

The decisions are harder.

And the consequences reach farther.

But as the darkness grows, so does the light of faith.

Churches that once sat half-empty begin filling again.

People who once mocked Christianity begin opening Bibles.

Teenagers begin sharing the Gospel.

Broken people begin praying.

New believers begin discovering that even when the world around them is collapsing, the kingdom of God cannot be shaken.

America may be breaking.

Civilization may be falling.

War may be approaching.

A new world order may be forming.

But God has not lost control.

He has never surrendered His throne.

And He never will.

As you enter the second chapter of the Ashes of America Series, I invite you once again to walk the roads of Ashwood.

Stand beside its defenders.

Enter its crowded shelters.

Sit inside its darkened churches.

Listen to the radios carrying news from a collapsing world.

Watch ordinary people struggle with fear, grief, temptation, courage, sacrifice, and faith.

And remember this:

When everything that can be shaken is shaken, what cannot be shaken becomes unmistakably clear.

The world may fall apart.

Nations may rise and disappear.

Governments may fail.

Armies may fall.

Human leaders may deceive.

But Jesus Christ remains the same.

And His promises remain true.

Welcome back to Ashwood.

Welcome to the breaking of America.

Dr. Paul Crawford

PROLOGUE

The Last Broadcast

"*For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.*"

— 1 Thessalonians 5:3

* * *

Route 13, South of Ashwood, Ohio

October 29 — 11:42 p.m.

Rachel Monroe had learned to hear engines long before she could see them.

Six months ago the sound of a motor had meant nothing. It was the background noise of American life, as ordinary as birdsong or the hum of a refrigerator. Now an engine meant fuel, and fuel meant power, and power in the new Ohio meant men with rifles who answered to no one.

She heard this one while she was still a quarter mile from the crossroads.

A diesel. Heavy. Coming from the east.

Rachel left the road and slid down the bank into the drainage ditch, wincing as ankle-deep water soaked through the boots she had taken from an empty farmhouse in Delaware County. The cold bit instantly. It was the first hard frost of the season, and the stars overhead burned with a sharpness she had never noticed back when the lights of Columbus had washed them from the sky.

There were no lights in Columbus anymore.

She pressed herself against the frozen mud and pulled the canvas satchel tight against her chest. Inside, wrapped in two layers of plastic trash bags and a strip of oilcloth, were eighty-seven pages of paper. They were the only thing she owned that mattered. She had carried them out of a burning city, across sixty miles of ruined countryside, through two robberies and one fever that had nearly killed her. She had slept with the satchel under her head and her hand on its strap every night for six months.

Someone had died to put those pages into her hands.

She did not intend to lose them in a ditch.

Headlights swept over the crest of the hill. Rachel held her breath as the truck rumbled past above her, close enough that she could smell the exhaust and hear men laughing in the bed. A second vehicle followed — a flatbed trailer pulled by a tractor, stacked high with something covered in tarps. Then three riders on horseback, their silhouettes dark against the starlight, rifles slung across their backs.

The convoy slowed at the crossroads and stopped.

Rachel closed her eyes. *Keep moving. Please, just keep moving.*

A door slammed. Boots crunched on gravel. A flashlight beam swung lazily across the field on the far side of the road.

“Why are we stopping?” someone called.

“Gotta take a leak. Hold your horses.”

Laughter. The flashlight beam wandered. It passed over the ditch a dozen yards from where she lay, lingered on the frozen water, and moved on.

“Colonel wants this load back at the Ridge before sunrise,” another voice said. Older. Harder. “You want to explain to him why we’re late?”

“Nobody’s explaining anything to the Colonel. Not after what happened at Harlan’s Crossing.”

A pause. When the older man spoke again, his voice was lower, and Rachel had to strain to hear him over the idling engine.

“Harlan’s Crossing got what it asked for. They had their chance to sign on.”

“Yeah. Well.” The younger man zipped his jacket. “How many towns does that make now?”

“Seven. Eight if you count what’s left of Brinkley.”

“And after that?”

The older man spat into the gravel. “After that, Ashwood.”

The name hit Rachel like a slap.

She had been walking toward Ashwood for three days.

“Ashwood’s got a militia,” the younger man said. “Heard they’ve got an Army Ranger running it. Heard they held off the Dawson brothers back in the summer with nothing but deer rifles and farm trucks.”

“The Dawson brothers were amateurs. The Colonel isn’t.” The older man’s flashlight clicked off. “Ashwood’s got grain. Ashwood’s got a working hospital, or near enough. Ashwood’s got the best farmland between here and Lake Erie. You think the Colonel’s going to let a town full of Bible thumpers sit on all that while his people eat boiled corn?”

“Bible thumpers?”

“That’s what they say. Churches are full over there. Every night of the week. Singing and praying like the world didn’t just end.” He snorted. “Maybe they think God’s going to stop bullets.”

“Maybe they’re right.” The younger man laughed, but it came out thin.

“Get in the truck.”

Doors slammed. The engine growled. The convoy lurched forward and rolled west, the riders trotting behind it, until the red glow of the taillights shrank to pinpricks and disappeared behind the trees.

Rachel did not move for a long time.

When she finally climbed out of the ditch, her legs were numb and her teeth were chattering so hard she bit her tongue. She needed shelter. She needed a fire, or at least four walls and a roof. If she spent the night in the open soaked to the knees, she would not see Ashwood at all.

A half mile north she found a church.

It was a small white clapboard building set back from the road behind a gravel lot and a row of bare maple trees. The steeple had been struck by something — lightning, maybe, or a stray shell during one

of the summer's skirmishes — and leaned drunkenly to one side. The front doors hung open. Most of the windows were gone.

A hand-painted sign stood in the weeds near the road. She could just make out the letters in the starlight.

PLEASANT VALLEY BAPTIST CHURCH — ALL ARE WELCOME

Rachel almost laughed. *All are welcome.* She wondered how many people had walked through those doors in the last six months looking for food and found nothing but hymnals.

She went inside anyway.

The sanctuary smelled of wet wood and mildew. Pews had been pulled apart for firewood; only a few rows remained near the front. Leaves had drifted across the carpet. Someone had built a fire in a steel wash tub near the pulpit at some point and left behind a small stack of broken lumber. Rachel's hands shook so badly it took her six tries to strike one of her precious matches, but at last the kindling caught and a small orange light bloomed in the darkness.

She pulled off her boots and socks and held her bare feet toward the flames until the feeling came back in stabbing needles. Then she opened the satchel.

She did this every night. She was not entirely sure why. Perhaps to reassure herself the pages were still there. Perhaps because she still did not fully believe what they said.

The top page was a cover memo on heavy, cream-colored paper. The letterhead had been partially burned away, but the seal in the upper corner was intact — a stylized globe encircled by twelve interlocking rings. Beneath it, in formal type:

FRAMEWORK FOR GLOBAL STABILIZATION AND RECOVERY

Draft Seven — Restricted Distribution

Contingency Planning Following a Sudden Large-Scale Population Loss Event

Rachel ran her thumb over the date typed beneath the title.

It was dated eleven weeks *before* the disappearances.

She had read the document so many times she could recite whole sections from memory. It described, in cold bureaucratic language, how the world should respond if millions of people vanished without warning. It laid out which nations would likely collapse and which would survive. It predicted — with a precision that made her skin crawl — that the United States would suffer a "catastrophic loss of centralized authority" within ninety days. It described the reopening of international trade routes, the coordination of food relief through a single oversight body, the need for "a unifying figure capable of commanding broad trust across ideological and national divisions."

It even predicted that some would claim the disappearances were religious in nature. Appendix C recommended strategies for "managing and discrediting fundamentalist interpretations."

Eleven weeks before.

Someone had known.

Or someone had planned for it with a thoroughness so complete that the difference no longer mattered.

Rachel had been a journalist for nine years. She had exposed crooked city councilmen and a pharmaceutical kickback scheme that had put two executives in federal prison. She had never believed in conspiracies. Conspiracies required competence, and in her experience, powerful people were rarely as competent as they were arrogant.

But she had seen that seal again.

Three weeks ago, in a farmhouse outside Sunbury, she had watched a flickering broadcast on a battery-powered television while an old farmer and his wife held hands on the couch beside her. The man on the screen had been speaking from a podium in Europe. Calm. Warm. Impossibly reassuring. He had talked about bread and medicine and peace, and when he promised that no child would go hungry through the coming winter, the farmer's wife had wept.

On the wall behind him, gleaming in gold, had hung a stylized globe encircled by twelve interlocking rings.

Rachel folded the pages and wrapped them back in their plastic. The fire popped. Outside, the wind moved through the broken windows with a low, mournful whistle.

For the first time, she looked up at the wall behind the pulpit.

Someone had painted words there, long ago, in careful black letters that had begun to flake:

"*Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*"

— Matthew 11:28

Below it, in fresher paint — red, uneven, as though written in haste by an unsteady hand — someone had added another line:

THEY WERE RIGHT. HE CAME FOR HIS OWN. IT'S NOT TOO LATE.

Rachel stared at the words until the fire burned low.

She did not believe in God. She had not believed since she was fourteen, when her mother had died of cancer despite the prayers of every church lady in Franklin County. She had spent six months telling herself that the disappearances had a rational explanation — a weapon, a phenomenon, something science would eventually understand.

But she had also spent six months carrying a document that had seen the vanishing coming.

And somewhere, someone had known exactly what to say about religion when it did.

Why would anyone need to discredit an explanation, a small voice in the back of her mind whispered, *unless they were afraid it was true?*

She lay down beside the dying fire with the satchel beneath her head and her hand on its strap.

In the morning, she would go to Ashwood.

She would find the town that the men in the truck called Bible thumpers. The town with a Ranger and a hospital and the best farmland between here and Lake Erie. The town that was next.

Someone there needed to know what she knew.

And though she would not have admitted it to anyone, Rachel Monroe was beginning to suspect that she needed to know what *they* knew, too.

* * *

Iron Ridge, Ohio

October 30 — 2:15 a.m.

Marcus Kane did not sleep much anymore.

He had never needed much sleep, not even during his two deployments with the Guard, when younger men had nodded off standing up. But since the day the world broke, sleep had become something almost foreign to him — a luxury for people who could afford to stop thinking.

Marcus could not afford to stop thinking.

He stood on the catwalk atop the western wall of Iron Ridge and looked out over his town. Six months ago the wall had not existed. Now it ran a mile and a half around the heart of the settlement — shipping containers stacked two high, welded together, and reinforced with steel plate salvaged from the old Hollister Steel Works that had given Iron Ridge its name. Guard towers stood at every corner. Floodlights, powered by diesel generators and used only sparingly, waited to blaze to life at the first sign of trouble.

Inside the wall, Iron Ridge was quiet and dark. Twelve hundred people slept in its houses and barracks. Every one of them was fed. Every one of them was protected. Every one of them owed that to him.

Outside the wall, the rest of Ohio was dying.

“Colonel.”

Marcus did not turn. He had heard Dutch Kessler’s heavy footsteps on the metal stairs a full minute earlier.

“The convoy’s back,” Kessler said. He was a big man, former Army, with a shaved head and a jaw like a cinder block. He had been the first to swear loyalty to Marcus when the county sheriff abandoned his post and fled south with his family and three cruisers full of department weapons. “Forty-one head of cattle from Harlan’s Crossing. Two tons of seed corn. Eleven hundred gallons of diesel from the co-op tanks. Medical supplies from their clinic, what little there was.”

“And the people?”

“Sixty-three signed the oath. We brought the able-bodied men back for training. The rest are staying put to work the fields under Hendricks’s supervision.”

“And the others?”

Kessler hesitated for a fraction of a second. “The mayor and the four men who fired on our scouts. Like you ordered.”

Marcus nodded slowly. He felt nothing. That was the part that would once have troubled him — the absence of feeling. He remembered a younger Marcus Kane who had lain awake for a week after his first firefight, sick over a boy he had shot in a doorway half a world away. That man seemed like a stranger now. A soft man. A man from a soft country that no longer existed.

“They had a choice,” Marcus said. “They chose poorly.”

“Yes, sir.”

“When the history of this region is written, Dutch, no one will remember Harlan’s Crossing. They’ll remember that the people inside these walls lived through the winter while everyone else starved. They’ll remember that someone made the hard decisions when no one else would.”

“Yes, sir.”

Marcus finally turned from the wall. Kessler held out a folded sheet of paper and a small handheld radio.

“Rourke’s back from Ashwood.”

Marcus took the paper and unfolded it under the red glow of a shielded flashlight. It was a hand-drawn map, remarkably detailed. Colby Rourke had been a surveyor before the collapse, and it showed. Every road into Ashwood was marked. Every checkpoint. Every sandbagged position. The courthouse, circled twice. The high school, labeled *CLINIC*. The grain elevator. The water treatment plant. And scattered across the town, small crosses marked in pencil.

“What are these?” Marcus asked, tapping one.

“Churches, sir. Rourke says they’re the busiest buildings in town. Lights on every night. Hundreds of people. He sat in the back of one of them two nights running and nobody asked him a single question. They just handed him a bowl of soup and a Bible.”

Marcus studied the map in silence.

“How many fighters?”

“Rourke estimates two hundred and fifty under arms. Maybe three hundred if you count the old men and the teenagers. Mostly hunting rifles and shotguns. A few ARs. Almost no automatic weapons. But they’re disciplined, sir. Reynolds — the Ranger — has them drilling every day. Rourke says the checkpoints are the tightest he’s seen anywhere in the state. He only got in because he came through with a group of refugees from Mansfield.”

“And their leadership?”

“Mayor’s still Brooks. Soft. A talker. The man who actually runs security is a former cop named Ethan Walker. Lost his wife and kid when everybody vanished. Rourke says the town trusts him more than the mayor.” Kessler paused. “Rourke says Walker’s one of the religious ones, too. Got converted sometime over the summer.”

Marcus's lip curled. "Religion."

He looked up at the stars. They were very bright tonight.

"You know what I learned about religion, Dutch? In Kandahar I watched men pray five times a day and then strap bombs to children. Back home I watched preachers in thousand-dollar suits beg old women for their Social Security checks. And then one afternoon half the churchgoers in America disappeared, and the ones who were left went running back to the same God who took everything from them." He shook his head. "It's fear. That's all it is. Fear dressed up in Sunday clothes."

Kessler said nothing. He had learned long ago when the Colonel wanted an answer and when he didn't.

"Fear I understand," Marcus continued quietly. "Fear can be useful. Fear keeps people in line. But a frightened man on his knees praying is a man who isn't planting corn or standing a watch. Ashwood is sitting on the richest land in three counties, and they're spending their nights singing hymns." He folded the map and slipped it into his coat pocket. "Tell Rourke he did good work. Tell him I want him back in Ashwood within two weeks. I want to know who they trust, who they don't, and who in that town might be persuaded to see reason."

"Yes, sir."

Marcus lifted the handheld radio. "What's this?"

"The broadcast, sir. The one out of Brussels. You said you wanted to hear it when it came through again. Signal's clear tonight. It's been repeating on the shortwave band since midnight."

Marcus switched it on.

Static hissed. Then a voice rose out of it — rich, measured, and strangely intimate, as though the speaker were sitting across a kitchen table rather than broadcasting across an ocean.

"*…and so I say to the people of North America, and especially to the people of the United States, who have suffered so terribly: you are not forgotten. You are not alone. The nations of the world have not abandoned you. Before this winter is over, the first relief convoys will cross your borders. Grain. Medicine. Fuel. Clean water. We ask only that you meet us halfway — that you set down your weapons, that you end the fighting between neighbors, that you choose cooperation over chaos. The old divisions have brought us nothing but ruin. It is time to build something new. Something whole. Together, we will…*"

Marcus clicked it off.

Kessler shifted uncomfortably. "Some of the men have been listening to him, Colonel. They talk about him in the barracks. They say he's the only one who's making any sense."

"He *is* making sense," Marcus said.

Kessler blinked.

"He's the smartest man on the planet right now, Dutch. Do you understand what he's doing? He isn't feeding people. Not yet. He's *promising* to feed them. And every promise buys him another thousand people who'll do anything he asks when the food finally shows up." A thin smile crossed Marcus's

face. “He knows the same thing I know. People don’t want freedom. Not really. They want somebody to make the fear go away. And they’ll hand over everything they own to whoever does it first.”

He turned back to the wall and looked north, toward the darkness where Ashwood lay sleeping twenty-six miles away.

“When his convoys come, and they will come, they won’t negotiate with a hundred little towns. They’ll negotiate with whoever controls the region. I intend for that to be me.”

“And Ashwood, sir?”

Marcus Kane was quiet for a long moment.

“Ashwood will join us,” he said at last. “Or Ashwood will burn.”

Somewhere out in the dark, a dog began to bark, then fell silent.

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

— Proverbs 14:12

* * *

First Baptist Church, Ashwood, Ohio

October 30 — 2:40 a.m.

The candle on her father’s desk had burned down to a stub, but Rebecca Whitfield did not reach for another one. Candles were precious now. Everything was precious now.

She sat in the worn leather chair in the pastor’s study, wrapped in a quilt her mother had made twenty years ago, and listened to her father’s voice.

It came from a small battery-powered cassette player — one of the dozens Noah Simmons and his youth volunteers had scavenged from attics, thrift stores, and abandoned homes all over Ashwood. Her father had recorded every Sunday sermon for thirty-one years. For most of Rebecca’s life, the tapes had been a family joke. *Dad, nobody listens to cassettes anymore. Put it on a podcast. Put it online.*

He had put some of them online. But the internet was gone now. The cassettes remained.

Box after box of them. Hundreds of hours of Pastor Caleb Whitfield, preaching to a congregation that had vanished, for a town that had not been listening.

It was listening now.

“*…and I want you to notice something about this verse,*” her father was saying. His voice crackled with the hiss of old tape, but it was unmistakably him — warm, unhurried, touched with the faint Kentucky drawl he had never lost. “*Paul doesn’t say that when the end comes, people will be afraid. He says just the opposite. He says, ‘When they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them.’ Do you hear that? The world won’t be panicking when judgment falls. It’ll be celebrating. It’ll be convinced that it has finally solved its problems. That’s the danger, church. Not war. War drives*

people to their knees. The danger is a false peace. A counterfeit hope. A man who promises the world everything it wants without ever asking it to repent."

Rebecca closed her eyes.

She remembered this sermon. Not because she had cared about it at the time, but because she had been in the congregation that Sunday — home from Cincinnati for her mother's birthday — and had spent the entire message texting a friend under the pew about how her father was "doing the end-of-the-world thing again."

She had been twenty-three years old. So certain. So bored.

"*The Bible tells us plainly that before the Lord returns in glory, a man will arise who will deceive the nations,*" her father went on. "*Daniel calls him the prince that shall come. Paul calls him the man of sin. John calls him the beast. And the Scripture says, 'He shall confirm the covenant with many for one week.' He'll come as a peacemaker. He'll come with answers. He'll come at a moment when the world is so frightened and so broken that it will embrace anyone who offers to fix it. Now, I'm not telling you who that is. I don't know. But I know this: when the world starts calling a man its savior, those of us who know the real Savior had better be on our knees.*"

The tape clicked. The side had ended.

Rebecca sat in the silence and let the words settle over her.

On the corner of the desk sat her father's Bible — the old black Scofield, its leather cracked, its pages soft as cloth, its margins so crowded with his tiny handwriting that she sometimes needed a magnifying glass to read them. She had carried it everywhere since the day he disappeared. She opened it now to First Thessalonians and found the verse he had just preached. In the margin, in faded blue ink, he had written:

False peace precedes true judgment. Watch for the peacemaker. Pray for the lost. — C.W.

And below that, in darker ink, as though added years later:

Lord, let my Becky be among those who believe. Even if it is after I am gone.

Rebecca pressed her hand flat against the page and wept.

She did not hear the door open.

"Miss Rebecca?"

She looked up, quickly wiping her eyes. Noah Simmons stood in the doorway, his tall, lanky frame bundled in a thrift-store Carhartt coat two sizes too large. Eighteen now. It still startled her. Six months ago he had been a sullen seventeen-year-old who wouldn't meet anyone's eyes, a boy who had lost both parents in an instant and hated God for taking them. Now he led a youth Bible study of forty teenagers, hauled firewood for widows, and prayed out loud in the courthouse square with a boldness that made grown men stop and listen.

He held a small shortwave radio in one hand.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I saw the light. I thought you might want to hear this.” His face was pale. “It’s him again. The guy from Brussels. He’s been on for twenty minutes. Mr. Graves told me to find you.”

Rebecca set the Bible down. “Turn it up.”

Noah twisted the dial. The same rich, gentle voice that had been filling radios across the continent for weeks rose out of the static.

“…I know that many of you have lost faith. Faith in your governments. Faith in your institutions. Perhaps even faith in God. I do not blame you. I have seen what you have seen. I have walked among the ruins. I have held the hands of mothers whose children are gone. And I will not insult you with easy answers about why these things happened.

But I will tell you this. Whatever took our loved ones from us, it did not take our capacity to love one another. It did not take our reason, our compassion, or our ability to rebuild. Humanity has always been at its greatest in its darkest hours. We need not wait for heaven to rescue us. We can rescue ourselves. We can build a world where there is no more war, no more hunger, no more fear. A world of true and lasting peace.

Peace, my friends. And safety. For every nation. For every family. For every child. That is my promise to you.”

The broadcast dissolved into music — something soaring and orchestral — and Noah switched it off.

For a moment neither of them spoke.

“Peace and safety,” Noah finally whispered. “He actually said it. Those exact words.”

“I know.”

“Miss Rebecca, people *love* him. At the clinic today, Mrs. Patterson said he’s the first person since the vanishing who made her feel like everything was going to be okay. Tommy Dean’s dad said we ought to hang his picture in the courthouse. Half the refugees at the south gate talk about him like he’s —” Noah stopped.

“Like he’s the Messiah,” Rebecca said quietly.

Noah nodded.

Rebecca rose, crossed the small study, and opened the window. Cold air poured in, smelling of woodsmoke and frost. Down the street, the stone bell tower of the Methodist church stood silhouetted against the stars. Beyond it, the faint orange glow of a watch fire burned at the east checkpoint. Somewhere a baby was crying.

Ashwood. Her father’s town. Her town now.

“My dad used to say that Satan’s greatest trick isn’t making people afraid,” she said. “It’s making them comfortable. Scripture says, ‘*Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.*’ He doesn’t come looking like a monster, Noah. He never has. He comes looking like the answer to everything you’ve ever wanted.”

“So what do we do?”

Rebecca turned from the window. She looked at the boy — no, the young man — standing in her father’s study with a radio in his hand and fear in his eyes. Then she looked at the Bible on the desk. At the margins filled with her father’s handwriting. At the prayer he had written for a daughter who wasn’t listening.

A prayer God had answered anyway.

“We do what Dad would have done,” she said. “We tell the truth. We love people. We feed whoever comes to the door. We open the Word, and we keep it open, no matter who’s on the radio.” She picked up the Bible and held it against her chest. “And we remember what Jesus told His disciples the night before He died: *‘In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.’”*

Noah swallowed hard and nodded.

“Go get some sleep,” Rebecca said gently. “You’ve got the youth breakfast at six.”

He smiled faintly. “You too, Miss Rebecca.”

When he was gone, she did not go to sleep.

She knelt beside her father’s desk, on the same worn spot in the carpet where he had knelt every morning for thirty-one years, and she prayed for Ashwood.

She prayed for the refugees at the south gate and the sick in the high school gym. She prayed for Sarah Collins, who had not slept a full night in weeks. She prayed for Jack Reynolds and his volunteers standing watch in the cold. She prayed for Ethan Walker, who carried more than any one man should carry.

And then, because her father would have, she prayed for the man on the radio.

Lord, I don’t know who he is. But You do. Open our eyes. Don’t let us be deceived. And don’t let us be afraid.

“*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.*”

— Psalm 46:1

* * *

The Courthouse, Ashwood, Ohio

October 30 — 3:17 a.m.

Ethan Walker had stopped looking at clocks at 3:17.

It had taken him months to break the habit. For weeks after the vanishing, he would glance at his watch and feel his stomach drop every time the numbers lined up — in the afternoon, when it had happened, and in the dead of night, when the memory came back hardest. 3:17. The minute Emily had been standing at the kitchen sink. The minute his daughter had been coloring at the table, humming to

herself. The minute he had been sitting in a patrol car two miles away, arguing on the phone with his wife about something so stupid he could no longer remember what it was.

And then silence on the line.

He did not look at his watch now. He did not need to. He knew what time it was the way he knew his own heartbeat.

He stood on the flat tar roof of the old county courthouse, the highest point in downtown Ashwood, with his rifle slung across his back and a thermos of chicory coffee cooling in his hands. Below him, the town square lay dark and still. The bandstand. The war memorial. The empty storefronts along Main Street, their windows boarded, their doorways piled with sandbags. The old Rialto Theater, now a food distribution center, its marquee still reading **NOW SHOWING** in faded plastic letters above nothing at all.

Six months.

It felt like six years. It felt like six days.

“You’re gonna freeze to death up here, Lieutenant.”

Jack Reynolds came up through the roof hatch with the unhurried economy of a man who had climbed a thousand ladders in a thousand dark places. He was forty-three now, lean and weathered, his close-cropped hair gone mostly gray over the summer. He carried an old Army-issue field radio on a strap over one shoulder.

“Not a lieutenant anymore, Jack.”

“You’ll always be a lieutenant to me. It’s easier than calling you Commander. Makes you sound like you ought to have a cape.” Jack settled beside him at the parapet and looked out over the town. “South gate’s quiet. Thirty-some more refugees came in tonight from up around Mansfield. Sarah’s got two of them in isolation. Fever. Coughing. She doesn’t like the look of it.”

Ethan closed his eyes briefly. “Influenza?”

“She thinks so. Maybe worse. She says if it gets into the camp, we could lose a lot of people before Christmas.” Jack was quiet for a moment. “She also said to tell you that if you don’t come get something to eat and sleep for at least four hours, she’s going to sedate you with the last of her ketamine.”

Ethan almost smiled. “She would, too.”

“She absolutely would.”

They stood together in the cold. Somewhere to the north, far away, came the faint crackle of gunfire — three shots, then two more, then nothing. Neither man reacted. Gunfire in the distance had become as ordinary as thunder.

“Got something else you need to hear,” Jack said. He unslung the field radio and set it on the parapet. “My guys on the north tower have been monitoring the federal emergency frequency every night like

you asked. Same loop as always. Recorded message from the Continuity of Government office. Hasn't changed in three months."

Ethan knew the message. Everyone in Ashwood knew it by heart. For weeks after the attacks, people had gathered in the square every evening to listen to it on a car radio connected to a tractor battery. *This is the National Emergency Alert System. The federal government remains operational. Citizens are urged to remain calm, remain in place, and await further instructions. Help is on the way.*

Help had never come.

"What about it?" Ethan asked.

Jack twisted the dial. The radio hissed. Beneath the static, faint but clear, came the familiar tones — three electronic beeps — and then the flat, recorded voice of a woman they had never met, speaking from a place none of them would ever see.

"*This is the National Emergency Alert System. The federal government remains operational. Citizens are urged to remain calm, remain in place, and await further —*"

The voice stopped.

Not faded. Not dissolved into static. Simply *stopped*, in the middle of a word, as though someone somewhere had reached out and switched it off.

Ethan waited. So did Jack.

Ten seconds. Twenty. A minute.

Then a new voice came over the frequency. A man's voice, tired and ragged, not recorded but live. Ethan could hear him breathing. He could hear, faintly, the hum of machinery in the background.

"This is… this is Major Thomas Albrecht, United States Army, Continuity Facility Seven. I don't know who's listening. I don't know if anyone is. I've been ordered to maintain this broadcast, but the people who gave that order haven't answered a transmission in forty-one days. Our generators are failing. Our food is gone. Most of the staff left weeks ago.

I'm not going to lie to you anymore. I'm sorry that we did. There is no federal government. There is no help on the way. There is no one coming.

Take care of each other. God help you. God help us all.

Albrecht out."

A click. Then static. Nothing but static, hissing and empty, stretching out over the frozen darkness like wind across an open grave.

Jack reached over and turned the radio off.

For a long time, neither man said anything.

Ethan found himself looking at the flagpole on the courthouse lawn below. The American flag still flew there. It had flown there every day for six months — through the riots, through the raids, through the

summer battle with the Dawson brothers, through every funeral. It was tattered now. The red stripes had faded almost to pink, and the bottom edge had been shredded by wind and weather into long, fluttering threads. Noah and his youth group lowered it every evening and raised it every morning, and no one had ever suggested they stop.

It hung limp in the still, cold air.

"Well," Jack said finally, his voice rough. "I guess that's that."

"I guess it is."

"You know what I kept thinking, all these months? That somewhere out there somebody was still in charge. Some general. Some cabinet secretary in a bunker. Somebody who was going to show up one day in a Humvee and tell us we did a good job and they'd take it from here." Jack shook his head. "Twenty-two years I wore that flag on my shoulder. I watched men die for it. I watched *friends* die for it."

"They didn't die for nothing, Jack."

"Didn't they?"

Ethan did not answer right away. He looked out at the dark town. At the watch fires burning at the checkpoints. At the steeple of First Baptist, where a single candle still glowed in the window of the pastor's study. At the high school, where Sarah Collins was probably still awake, bending over a sick child by the light of a kerosene lamp.

"Six months ago," he said slowly, "I would have told you the same thing. I would have told you nothing means anything. That we live and we die and that's the end of the story." He shook his head. "But I don't believe that anymore. I can't. Not after what I've seen."

"The churches."

"The churches. Rebecca. Noah. Sarah. People who should have given up and didn't. People who had every reason to hate each other and started taking care of each other instead." He paused. "Pastor Whitfield has a sermon — Rebecca played it for me last week — where he talks about how every earthly kingdom eventually falls. Babylon. Persia. Greece. Rome. He said America would fall too someday, and that when it did, the people of God shouldn't be surprised, because we were never meant to put our hope in it in the first place." Ethan was quiet a moment. "'*For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.*' Hebrews thirteen."

Jack grunted. "You sound more like a preacher every day."

"God help Ashwood if I'm the best preacher it's got."

That drew a short laugh from the older man. Then Jack's face grew serious again.

"Something else," he said. "My scouts spotted a convoy on Route 13 tonight. Headed west toward Iron Ridge. Cattle. Grain. Fuel. Looked like it came from Harlan's Crossing."

Ethan felt the familiar tightening in his chest. "Harlan's Crossing wouldn't give up their herd. Tom Mitchell would've fought for every last cow."

“I know.” Jack’s jaw worked. “I think Tom Mitchell’s dead, Ethan. I think Kane took the whole town.”

Ethan gripped the cold stone of the parapet.

Harlan’s Crossing was fourteen miles away. Ethan had gone to high school with half the men there. He had played Friday night football against their brothers and cousins. He had eaten fried catfish at their volunteer fire department fundraiser every summer for fifteen years.

“That’s seven towns,” he said quietly.

“Eight, if you count Brinkley.”

“And he’s not going to stop.”

“No,” Jack said. “Men like Kane never stop. Not until somebody stops them.” He looked southwest, toward the distant, invisible darkness where Iron Ridge lay. “We’re the last real town between him and the lake, Ethan. Everything else is either his or too weak to matter. He’s coming. Maybe not this month. Maybe not this winter. But he’s coming.”

Ethan said nothing for a long time.

Then he reached into the pocket of his coat and drew out a small, battered New Testament with a green cover — the kind the Gideons used to hand out on college campuses and at county fairs. He had found it in the glove box of Emily’s car three days after she disappeared. She had underlined a single verse in pink highlighter, the way she underlined everything, and he had read it a thousand times since. He did not need the light to find it now.

“‘*Except the Lord build the house,*’” he said softly, “‘*they labour in vain that build it: except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.*’”

Jack looked at him.

“Psalm 127,” Ethan said. “Emily’s favorite.” He put the New Testament back in his pocket. “We’ll build the walls, Jack. We’ll dig the trenches and train the volunteers and stand every watch. We’ll do everything we can. But if God doesn’t keep this town, none of it is going to matter.”

Jack was quiet. Then, to Ethan’s surprise, the old Ranger nodded slowly.

“Then I guess somebody better start praying,” he said.

“Somebody already is.”

Ethan nodded toward the candle still burning in the window of First Baptist.

Far to the east, beyond the fields and the dark hardwood forests, the first faint gray of dawn was not yet visible, but it was coming. It always came. Ethan had learned that much in six months. The night was long, and it was cold, and sometimes it seemed as though it would never end.

But the morning always came.

“*It is of the LORD’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness.*”

— Lamentations 3:22–23

Below them, the tattered flag stirred once in a sudden breath of wind and then fell still.

Somewhere across the ocean, a man was promising the world peace and safety.

Somewhere to the south, a frightened woman was sleeping beside a dying fire with the truth wrapped in plastic beneath her head.

Somewhere to the west, a man who believed in nothing but strength was drawing red circles on a map.

And in a small town in north-central Ohio, a handful of ordinary people who had once mocked the Word of God now clung to it as the only solid ground left in a world that was falling apart.

The United States of America had not ended with a bang.

It had ended with a click and a hiss of static at 3:17 in the morning, heard by two tired men on a courthouse roof.

The Breaking of America had begun.

"*Watchman, what of the night? The watchman said, The morning cometh, and also the night.*"

— Isaiah 21:11–12

* * *

END OF PROLOGUE

THE BREAKING OF AMERICA

Book Two of the Ashes of America Series

Dr. Paul Crawford

PART ONE — A NATION DIVIDED

* * *

CHAPTER 1

Six Months Later

"*It is of the LORD's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not.*"

— Lamentations 3:22

* * *

Ashwood, Ohio

October 30 — 6:40 a.m.

The sun came up over Ashwood the way it always had — slow and golden over the eastern cornfields, burning the frost off the rooftops one by one — and for a moment, if Ethan Walker did not look too closely, the town looked almost the same.

He had learned not to look too closely.

He came down the courthouse steps with his rifle slung and his breath smoking in the cold, and he walked. He walked every morning after a night watch. Sarah Collins called it stubbornness. Jack Reynolds called it a bad habit. Ethan called it the only way he knew to take the measure of the town before the day swallowed him whole.

Main Street stretched out before him, four blocks of red-brick storefronts built back when Ashwood had been a railroad town and people still believed it would one day be a city. Most of the windows were boarded now. Some had been boarded since the first week, when the looting started. Others had been boarded in July, after the Dawson brothers came through with their pickup trucks and their stolen National Guard rifles and tried to burn the grain elevator. Painted across the plywood, in the neat lettering of the high school art teacher, were the words that had become the town's unofficial motto:

ASHWOOD STANDS.

Beneath it, in smaller letters, someone had added:

"***God is our refuge and strength.*" — *Psalm 46:1***

Ethan passed Miller's Hardware, which had become the tool library, where anyone in town could borrow a saw or a shovel or a post-hole digger as long as they brought it back by sundown. He passed the old Ashwood Savings & Loan, whose vault now held not money but penicillin, insulin, and every other drug worth stealing, guarded around the clock by two volunteers with shotguns. Money meant nothing now. A hundred-dollar bill was good for starting fires. A bottle of amoxicillin could buy a milk cow.

He passed the Corner Diner, its windows dark. The Hendersons had run it for forty years. Both of them had vanished at 3:17, along with their son, their daughter-in-law, and the two grandchildren who used to spin on the counter stools on Saturday mornings. Nobody had touched the diner since. The coffee cups were still on the counter, the menus still in their holders. Someone had placed a small wooden cross against the front door, and every few weeks someone else — Ethan never knew who — left fresh wildflowers beside it.

Now there were no wildflowers left to pick. Only a bundle of dried goldenrod, brittle and gray with frost.

He kept walking.

At the corner of Main and Third, the line had already started outside the Rialto Theater.

It stretched down the block and around the corner — two hundred people, maybe more, standing in the cold with empty buckets and canvas bags and plastic grocery sacks. Mothers holding toddlers wrapped in blankets. Old men leaning on canes. Teenagers stamping their feet to stay warm. They were quiet. That was what Ethan noticed most. Six months ago a crowd this size would have been loud — talking,

laughing, complaining, scrolling their phones. Now they simply stood and waited, their faces thin and patient and tired.

The marquee above them still read **NOW SHOWING** in faded plastic letters. Beneath it, a hand-lettered sign had been nailed up:

DAILY RATIONS — 7:00 A.M.

ONE PORTION PER REGISTERED PERSON

BRING YOUR CARD

Ethan knew what was in the portions. He had helped set them. A cup and a half of cornmeal. Half a cup of dried beans. A potato or two when the potatoes were good. On Tuesdays and Fridays, a strip of smoked pork or venison the size of a man's palm. Milk for children under ten. Eggs when the hens were laying, which they mostly weren't anymore, not with the days getting shorter.

It was enough to live on.

It was not enough to live well.

"Morning, Commander."

Ethan turned. Old Walt Kimble was standing near the front of the line, bundled in a hunting coat that hung off his frame like a tent. Walt had been Ethan's Little League coach thirty years ago — a big, loud, barrel-chested man who could hit a softball over the left-field fence at seventy. He had lost forty pounds since spring. His cheekbones stood out like knuckles.

"Morning, Walt. How's Martha?"

"Coughing." Walt's jaw tightened. "Doc Collins says it's just a cold. Says to keep her warm and get fluids in her." He tried to smile. "Hard to keep anybody warm when you're rationing firewood."

"I'll get some of Noah's boys over with a load this afternoon."

"You don't have to do that. There's folks worse off than us."

"I know," Ethan said. "I'm doing it anyway."

Walt looked at him for a long moment. Then he reached out and gripped Ethan's arm with a hand that had once been strong enough to crush a walnut.

"Your daddy would've been proud of you, son," he said quietly. "Emily too."

Ethan nodded because he could not speak.

He walked on.

* * *

The courthouse square was waking up by the time he circled back.

The volunteers from Noah's youth group were raising the flag. Ethan stopped on the sidewalk and watched them — three teenagers in thrift-store coats, one of them no more than fourteen, hauling the

rope hand over hand while the tattered stars and stripes climbed the pole in the gray morning light. They did it with a strange solemnity, as though it were a sacred thing.

Maybe it was.

He thought of the voice on the radio at 3:17 that morning. *There is no federal government. There is no help on the way. There is no one coming.*

The flag reached the top of the pole and hung there, limp, then stirred and lifted in a gust of wind.

Ethan did not tell the teenagers what he had heard. Not yet. That was not his decision to make.

It was the mayor's.

Along the courthouse's south wall, beneath the tall windows of the old county recorder's office, stretched what people had started calling the Wall of the Missing.

It had begun the first week. A mother had taped a photograph of her vanished son to the limestone with a piece of masking tape and written beneath it, *Has anyone seen Tyler? Age 6.* By the end of the week there were a hundred photographs. By the end of the month there were two thousand.

Now the wall was covered from the sidewalk to as high as a tall man could reach, and the photographs had spread around the corner and down the west side of the building. School pictures. Wedding pictures. Snapshots from birthday parties and fishing trips and church picnics. Ultrasound images. Hospital photos of newborns with tiny knit caps and plastic bracelets. Rain and sun and wind had faded many of them nearly white, and people had come back and replaced them, or laminated them, or covered them in plastic wrap.

Nobody wrote *Has anyone seen?* anymore.

Everyone knew.

Ethan did not need to look for his own photographs. He knew exactly where they were — third row from the top, just left of the recorder's office window. Emily at the county fair, laughing, her hair blowing across her face. And beside it, his daughter at four years old, grinning in a pink rain slicker, holding up a tadpole in a jelly jar like it was the greatest treasure in the world.

He had put them up himself, the second week. He had stood there with a roll of tape in his hands and a hard knot of fury in his chest, hating God — the God he did not believe in — for taking them.

He stood in front of them now, and the fury was gone.

What remained was an ache so deep it had become part of him, like a bone that had healed crooked. And beneath the ache, fragile but real, something he would never have believed six months ago.

Hope.

Not hope that they would come back. He knew they would not. But hope that he would see them again. That Emily had been right about everything she had tried so patiently to tell him for eleven years. That the God who had taken her had not stolen her but *gathered* her — lifted her up out of a world about to burn, the way a father lifts a child out of a burning house.

“*For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.*”

First Thessalonians four. Rebecca had read it aloud at the first Bible study Ethan had ever attended, back in June, in the basement of First Baptist with a kerosene lantern hissing on the table. He had sat in the back with his arms folded and his jaw clenched, determined not to believe a word of it.

He had gone home that night and read it forty times.

“Ethan.”

He turned. Mayor Daniel Brooks was coming down the courthouse steps, a steaming mug of chicory coffee in each hand. Brooks was fifty-six, with a round, kind face and wire-rimmed glasses he kept pushing up his nose. Before the vanishing he had owned the Ford dealership on Route 42 and served three terms as mayor mostly because nobody else wanted the job. His hair had gone from salt-and-pepper to snow white in six months.

He handed Ethan a mug. “Jack told me.”

Ethan wrapped his cold fingers around the warm ceramic. “All of it?”

“All of it.” Brooks looked up at the flag. “Major Thomas Albrecht. Continuity Facility Seven. ‘There is no one coming.’” He shook his head slowly. “You know, I think I’d already made my peace with it. The government, I mean. Nobody’s seen the President since May. Columbus is gone. The governor’s office stopped answering in June. I knew it. I’ve known it for months.” He took a long sip of coffee. “But there’s knowing a thing, and then there’s hearing it said out loud.”

“What are you going to tell people?”

“The truth.” Brooks sighed. “What else is there? We’ll call a town meeting tonight. First Baptist — it’s the only building big enough to hold everyone that we can still heat.” He paused. “They deserve to hear it from me, not from rumors.”

“There’s more, Daniel.” Ethan lowered his voice. “Jack’s scouts saw a convoy on Route 13 last night. Cattle and grain from Harlan’s Crossing, headed west.”

Brooks went very still.

“Tom Mitchell,” he said.

“Jack thinks he’s dead. Jack thinks Kane took the whole town.”

The mayor closed his eyes. Ethan watched something pass over his face — grief, then fear, then a kind of weary calculation that Ethan had come to recognize over the last six months. Daniel Brooks was a good man. An honest man. But he had never been built for war, and it was eating him alive.

“That’s eight towns,” Brooks said at last.

“Eight.”

“And we’re the last one between him and the lake.” Brooks opened his eyes and looked at Ethan. “You know what people are going to say, don’t you? When they hear this? Some of them are going to say we should talk to Kane. Negotiate. Make a deal before he comes to us.”

“Kane doesn’t make deals. He makes subjects.”

“I know that. You know that.” Brooks rubbed his temple. “But there’s nine thousand people in this town, Ethan, and another fourteen hundred in the camp at the south gate, and every one of them is hungry and cold and scared. Scared people want someone to make the fear go away.” He looked down into his coffee. “Sometimes I’m scared enough to want it myself.”

Ethan didn’t answer. There was nothing to say that wouldn’t sound like a sermon, and Daniel Brooks had heard enough sermons. So instead he simply stood beside his friend in the cold morning light, in front of a wall of faces that would never come home, and after a while he put a hand on the older man’s shoulder.

“*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 one, verse nine. He didn’t say it out loud. But he prayed it — for Daniel, for himself, for all of them.

* * *

Ashwood High School — Community Clinic

8:15 a.m.

The gymnasium still smelled faintly of floor wax and old sweat, but those smells were buried now beneath the sharper odors of bleach, woodsmoke, boiled linen, and sickness.

Dr. Sarah Collins stood at the center of the basketball court with a clipboard in one hand and a pencil stub in the other, and she counted beds.

Forty-two cots in six neat rows where the Ashwood Wildcats had once run their layup drills. Thirty-seven of them occupied. Beneath the scoreboard, still frozen at **HOME 0 — GUEST 0** from a game that had never been played, a row of folding tables held what was left of the town’s medical supplies. Behind the bleachers, in the old wrestling room, a wood stove kept four pots of water at a rolling boil around the clock. On the stage at the far end, behind a curtain stitched together from bedsheets, was the surgical area — a single stainless steel table salvaged from the veterinarian’s office, lit by two car headlamps wired to a bank of batteries.

It was the best hospital in forty miles.

It was not a hospital at all.

Sarah had been awake for twenty-two hours. She had delivered a baby at midnight, set a broken arm at two, and spent the rest of the night sitting beside a seventy-nine-year-old retired schoolteacher named Eleanor Pruitt, holding her hand and listening to her lungs fill with fluid. Eleanor had died at 5:10 a.m.,

quietly, with Sarah's hand in hers and Pastor Samuel Graves reading the Twenty-third Psalm in his slow, gravelly voice.

"*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*"

Eleanor had smiled at the end. Sarah was certain of it. Six months ago she would have explained it clinically — facial muscle relaxation, oxygen deprivation, endorphins. Now she wasn't sure of anything except that Eleanor Pruitt had died unafraid, and that it had not been the medicine that made her so.

There had been no medicine to give her.

Sarah flipped to the supply page on her clipboard and read it for the third time that morning, as if the numbers might change.

Amoxicillin — 4 bottles (partial). Ciprofloxacin — 1 bottle. Doxycycline — 0. IV saline — 11 bags. Morphine — 6 vials. Ketamine — 2 vials. Insulin — 14 vials (need refrigeration — spring house holding at 45°F). Sutures — adequate. Gauze — boiling and reusing. Oxygen — 0.

She had been a doctor for four years, most of it in the emergency department at Mercy General in Mansfield. In four years she had never once had to decide which patient deserved an antibiotic. Now she made that decision every day. A child with an ear infection or an old man with a festering wound? A young mother with a kidney infection or a teenage boy with a gunshot wound that had turned red and hot at the edges?

She was a physician who had become a rationing clerk.

And winter was coming.

"Doc?"

Sarah looked up. Megan Torres, twenty-two, a former nursing student from Ohio State who had walked ninety miles to get home to Ashwood after the bombs fell on Columbus, was standing at the edge of the court in a surgical mask made from a cut-up T-shirt. Megan had become Sarah's right hand, her shadow, the only person in town Sarah trusted to run the clinic when she finally collapsed.

"The two from last night," Megan said. "In isolation. You need to see them."

Sarah followed her through the double doors into the old boys' locker room, which had become the isolation ward. Megan handed her a mask. Sarah tied it on.

The two patients lay on cots at the far end of the room, as far from the doors as possible. A man in his forties and a girl who couldn't have been more than ten. Father and daughter, refugees from Mansfield. They had walked in through the south gate the night before with thirty others, carrying nothing but a backpack and a Walmart bag full of canned peaches.

The girl was sleeping, her cheeks flushed a hectic red, her dark hair plastered to her forehead. The father was awake, propped up on one elbow. His eyes were glassy with fever. When he coughed, it was a deep, wet, tearing sound that Sarah felt in her own chest.

She knelt beside him and took his pulse. Rapid. His skin was burning.

“How long have you been sick, Mr. —”

“Hollis,” he rasped. “Dale Hollis. Four days. Maybe five. Started in the camp outside Lexington. Half the camp had it.” He looked at his daughter, and his voice broke. “Is she going to be okay?”

Sarah pressed her stethoscope to his chest and listened. Crackles in the lower lobes. Not pneumonia yet. But close.

“Headache?” she asked. “Muscle aches? Came on fast?”

“Like getting hit by a truck.”

Influenza. She was almost sure of it. Maybe a bad strain, the kind that swept through crowded places like fire through dry grass. Six months ago she would have swabbed him, run a rapid test, started him on antivirals, and admitted him to a clean hospital bed with oxygen and IV fluids.

Now she had none of those things.

“You’re both going to stay here, where it’s warm,” she said, keeping her voice calm. “We’ll get fluids into you, keep your fevers down, and watch your lungs. Megan’s going to bring some willow bark tea for the fever and broth as soon as you can keep it down. Your daughter’s young and strong. That helps.”

It was the truth. It was also not nearly enough, and Dale Hollis knew it. She saw it in his eyes.

“Doc,” he whispered. “Please. She’s all I’ve got left. Her mama —” He stopped. “Her mama was a church lady. Sang in the choir. She told me this was going to happen, you know? Told me for years. I laughed at her.” His eyes filled. “Now she’s gone, and it’s just me and Katie, and I don’t — I don’t know how to pray. I don’t know if He’d even listen to somebody like me.”

Sarah looked at him for a long moment.

Six months ago she had been an atheist. Not an angry one — just a scientist who had never seen any reason to believe in anything she couldn’t measure. Then, on an ordinary spring afternoon at 3:17, in the middle of an emergency appendectomy, the surgical nurse across the table from her had vanished. Not fainted. Not stepped away. *Vanished* — scrubs, gloves, and mask crumpling to the floor, a pair of hemostats clattering on the tile.

Sarah had finished the surgery. She still didn’t know how.

She had found Pastor Caleb Whitfield’s Bible a week later, lying open on the front seat of his car in the parking lot of First Baptist, and she had read the Gospel of John in a single sitting in that car, by the light of a flashlight, while outside the town burned.

She took Dale Hollis’s hot, trembling hand.

“He listens,” she said softly. “I promise you, Mr. Hollis, He listens. He listened to me, and I was a lot further away from Him than you are.” She squeezed his hand. “‘*The LORD is nigh unto them that are*

of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit.' That's Psalm thirty-four. You don't need fancy words. You just need to tell Him the truth."

Dale Hollis closed his eyes. His lips began to move.

Sarah stayed beside him until he fell asleep.

When she came out of the locker room, Pastor Samuel Graves was waiting in the hallway, leaning on his hickory cane.

He was seventy-four years old, stooped and silver-haired, with a face like a walnut and a voice like gravel in a cement mixer. For forty years he had farmed six hundred acres of soybeans on the county line and attended the Pleasant Grove Methodist Church twice a year, on Christmas and Easter, mostly because his wife made him. His wife had disappeared at 3:17. Samuel Graves had spent three days alone in his farmhouse with a shotgun on the kitchen table, trying to work up the courage to use it.

Then he had found her Bible on the nightstand.

Now he preached every Sunday in the gymnasium to anyone who would listen, and sat with the dying every night, and said the Lord had given him a second chance at seventy-four that He had offered him every day of his first seventy-three.

"Influenza?" he asked.

"I think so." Sarah pulled off her mask and leaned against the cinderblock wall. She was suddenly so tired she could barely stand. "Samuel, if this gets into the camp — fourteen hundred people packed into tents and campers and cattle barns, sharing latrines, sharing water — it'll go through them like wildfire. And from the camp, it'll get into town. We could lose the old ones. The babies. Anybody with asthma or heart trouble or diabetes." She pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes. "I've got four bottles of amoxicillin, Samuel. Four. Amoxicillin doesn't even touch the flu. It only helps with the pneumonia that comes after."

The old man said nothing for a moment. Then he laid a gnarled, liver-spotted hand on her shoulder.

"You know what my granddaddy used to say during the Depression?" he said. "He said, 'The Lord never gives you tomorrow's bread today. He gives you today's bread today.'" He smiled faintly. "'*Give us this day our daily bread.*' Not this month. Not this winter. This day."

"That's not a medical plan, Samuel."

"No," he agreed. "It's a better one." His smile faded. "Go home and sleep, Sarah. Four hours. Megan can manage, and I'll sit with the Hollis girl. You're no good to anybody dead on your feet."

"Ethan says the same thing."

"Ethan's right." His eyes twinkled. "Don't tell him I said so. It'll go to his head."

Despite everything, Sarah laughed.

It was a small thing. But it was the first time she had laughed in three days, and she held on to it all the way home.

* * *

Whitaker Farm, Two Miles East of Ashwood

11:30 a.m.

The last of the corn was in.

Jack Reynolds stood at the edge of Hal Whitaker's north field and looked out over two hundred acres of stubble, gray and broken beneath a pale sky. Beyond it, the Whitaker barns — a white bank barn built in 1891 and a newer steel pole barn — stood against a windbreak of dark cedars. Beyond that, the land rolled away in long brown swells toward the distant tree line, where Jack had posted a two-man observation team on the ridge with binoculars and a radio.

Hal Whitaker stood beside him, sixty-eight years old, hands like leather, wearing the same seed-company cap he'd worn every day of his adult life. He had lost his daughter and three grandchildren at 3:17. He had lost his son-in-law in August, shot through the chest by a raider while guarding this very field.

He had not missed a day of work.

"Two hundred eighty bushels to the acre in the bottomland," Hal said. "Hundred and sixty on the hill. Not bad, considering we had no fertilizer and half of it went in late." He spat. "Would've been better if we had the combines running. Hand-picking two hundred acres of corn with a bunch of schoolteachers and insurance salesmen." He shook his head. "My daddy would've laughed himself sick."

"Your daddy would've been proud," Jack said.

Hal grunted. That was the closest he ever came to accepting a compliment.

Behind them, in the barnyard, a crew of thirty volunteers was working the corn crib — scooping ears, shelling them with hand-cranked shellers that Hal had pulled out of his granddaddy's barn and oiled back to life, bagging the kernels in feed sacks, and loading them onto a horse-drawn wagon. A year ago there had not been a working horse-drawn wagon in the county outside the Amish settlements. Now there were forty.

Jack watched them work. Accountants. Nurses. Factory workers. A former realtor named Donna Pierce, who had sold half the houses in Ashwood and now shelled corn with blisters on both hands and never complained. A tall, quiet man named Luis Ortega, who had been a line cook at the Applebee's on Route 42 and turned out to be the best marksman Jack had ever trained.

These were his soldiers. Not a single professional among them. And they had held this town for six months against everything the world had thrown at them.

He was prouder of them than of any unit he had ever served in.

He was also more afraid for them.

"Give me the numbers, Hal," he said.

The old farmer pulled a folded sheet of notebook paper from his coat pocket and handed it over without a word. Jack unfolded it. Hal's handwriting was cramped and slanted but perfectly legible — he had kept books for his own farm for fifty years and he didn't make mistakes.

Jack read it once. Then again. Then a third time.

"You're sure about this?"

"I'm sure." Hal's voice was flat. "That's every bushel of corn, every sack of beans, every potato, every jar of canned goods, and every pound of meat from every farm inside the defense perimeter. I checked it against Janet Morrow's figures at the elevator and against the church pantries. Counted twice." He looked out over the stubble field. "We've got enough to feed the town through the end of February. Maybe the middle of March if we cut rations another quarter. That's counting the town. That's *not* counting the camp."

"And if we count the camp?"

Hal didn't answer.

He didn't have to.

Jack folded the paper and put it in his own pocket. Fourteen hundred refugees. More arriving every week — from Mansfield, from Marion, from the burned-out suburbs north of Columbus. They came with nothing. Most of them had been walking for weeks. Many of them were sick. Some of them were dangerous.

And every one of them needed to eat.

"Planting's in April," Hal said. "First real harvest isn't till July. Maybe late June if we get the early potatoes and the peas in quick. That's four months with nothing coming out of the ground." He turned to Jack, and for the first time Jack saw fear in the old man's weathered face. "I've been farming this ground for fifty years, Jack. I've seen drought. I've seen hail wipe out a whole crop in ten minutes. I've seen the bank take the farm next door. But I have never — not once — looked out at a field and thought, *people are going to starve.*"

He was quiet for a long moment.

"I'm thinking it now."

Jack had nothing to offer him. No strategy. No tactical solution. He had been trained to take hills and hold bridges and extract wounded men under fire. Nobody had ever trained him for this — for the slow, silent arithmetic of hunger.

So he said the only thing he could think of. The thing his grandmother used to say, back in the little clapboard house in West Virginia where he'd spent his summers as a boy, when there was nothing in the cupboard but flour and lard and faith.

"'*I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.*'"

Hal looked at him in surprise. "Psalm thirty-seven."

“My granny’s favorite.” Jack shrugged, embarrassed. “Didn’t know I remembered it till just now.”

The old farmer studied him. Then, slowly, something that was almost a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

“You know, when you first came to Rebecca’s Bible study, I gave you two weeks before you quit.”

“So did I.”

“How long’s it been now?”

Jack thought about it. “Eleven weeks.”

“Huh.” Hal turned back to the field. “Maybe there’s hope for all of us.”

Jack’s radio crackled on his hip.

“*Ridge One to Reynolds. Ridge One to Reynolds.*”

He keyed it. “Go ahead, Ridge One.”

“*We’ve got movement on the Iron Ridge road, about three miles southwest. Single rider on horseback. Stopped on the hill by the old Shell station. He’s glassing the farms with binoculars. Been there about ten minutes.*”

Jack’s jaw tightened. “Is he armed?”

“*Rifle across the saddle. Looks like he’s making notes.*”

“Don’t engage. Just watch him. Let me know when he moves.”

“*Copy.*”

Jack lowered the radio. Hal Whitaker was watching him.

“Kane’s people?”

“Probably.” Jack looked southwest, toward the distant hills. “They’ve been scouting us for weeks. They’re counting our farms. Counting our fighters. Figuring out where we’re weak.”

“And where are we weak?”

Jack looked at the stubble field. At the volunteers shelling corn in the barnyard. At the long, open miles of farmland that ran out in every direction from the edge of town — too many roads, too many fences, too many barns and houses and fields to defend with two hundred and fifty tired farmers and schoolteachers.

“Everywhere,” he said.

* * *

Hillside Cemetery

3:00 p.m.

The cemetery sat on a gentle rise just west of town, where the old Ashwood founding families had buried their dead since before the Civil War. Tall oaks and sugar maples, their last leaves blazing red and gold, shaded rows of weathered headstones. From the top of the hill you could see the whole town laid out below — the courthouse dome, the church steeples, the grain elevator, the high school, and beyond it all the patchwork of harvested fields rolling away toward the horizon.

It had once been the most peaceful place in Ashwood.

It was the busiest place now.

Rebecca Whitfield came up the gravel lane with her father's Bible under her arm and stopped at the crest of the hill, as she always did, to steel herself.

The new section began where the old iron fence ended. Six months ago it had been a hayfield. Now it stretched in long, raw rows down the western slope — mounds of fresh brown earth marked with wooden crosses, homemade and hand-lettered. Some had names burned into them with a soldering iron. Some had names painted in white house paint. A few had no names at all, only a date and a word: *UNKNOWN*.

Rebecca had stopped counting at three hundred.

She walked slowly among them, reading the names she knew. *Gerald Hopkins, Age 71 — Heart.* He had run out of his medication in June. *Brittany Lane, Age 34 — Childbirth.* She had died in the gymnasium clinic with Sarah Collins fighting to save her for six straight hours; the baby had lived. *Corey Whitaker, Age 38 — Killed defending Whitaker Farm.* Hal's son-in-law. *The Dawson Raid — July 19 — Eleven Defenders —* "*Greater love hath no man than this.*"

And at the end of the newest row, freshly dug that morning, a narrow rectangle of dark earth with a wooden cross that read, in Samuel Graves's careful block capitals:

ELEANOR PRUITT — AGE 79

"**PRECIOUS IN THE SIGHT OF THE LORD IS THE DEATH OF HIS SAINTS.**" **— PSALM 116:15**

Mrs. Pruitt had taught Rebecca third grade. She had given her a gold star for memorizing the fifty state capitals and a stern lecture for passing notes during spelling. She had come to faith in July, in the basement of First Baptist, sitting in the front row with her walker parked beside her and tears streaming down her powdered cheeks.

I prayed for Caleb's girl every Sunday for twenty years, she had told Rebecca afterward, clutching her hand. *I never dreamed I'd be the one sitting next to her when we both finally came home.*

Rebecca knelt beside the grave and laid a small bundle of dried bittersweet on the raw earth.

Down the hill, near the far fence, a group of teenage boys were digging. Rebecca could hear the rhythmic scrape and thud of their shovels in the cold ground. Noah Simmons was among them, stripped to his T-shirt despite the chill, his coat hanging on a fencepost. He looked up, saw her, and raised a dirt-streaked hand.

She raised hers back.

The boys were digging three more graves. Not for anyone who had died yet. For whoever would die next. Sarah had asked them to, quietly, a month ago. *The ground's going to freeze,* she'd said. *By December we won't be able to dig at all. I don't want families waiting until March to bury their people.*

So Noah and his friends came up the hill every afternoon, and dug graves in advance for people who were still alive.

Rebecca thought it was the saddest thing she had ever seen.

She also thought it was one of the most faithful.

She heard footsteps on the gravel behind her and did not need to turn to know who it was. She knew his walk by now — steady, unhurried, a little heavy on the left foot from an old injury.

Ethan Walker stopped beside her and looked down at Eleanor Pruitt's grave.

"Samuel told me," he said. "I'm sorry, Rebecca. I know she meant a lot to you."

"She meant a lot to everyone." Rebecca stood and brushed the dirt from her knees. "She died well, Ethan. Samuel was with her. Sarah too. She wasn't afraid." Her voice caught. "That's what Dad always said he wanted most for the people he loved. Not that they'd live long. That they'd die unafraid."

They stood together in silence for a while.

Then, without speaking, Ethan walked to the old section of the cemetery, just inside the iron fence, and stopped in front of a smooth gray granite headstone. Rebecca followed him. She had seen him stand here before.

The stone was new. Ethan had carved it himself over the summer, working at night by lantern light in the monument shop behind the Lutheran church, teaching himself as he went. The letters were not perfectly straight. He had apologized for that. Rebecca had told him that it was the most beautiful stone in the cemetery.

EMILY ANNE WALKER

AND OUR DAUGHTER

"**NOT LOST — ONLY GONE BEFORE.**"

CAUGHT UP TO MEET THE LORD

There was nothing buried beneath it. There never would be.

"Sometimes I still can't believe it," Ethan said quietly. "I wake up in the morning and for about three seconds I forget. I reach over for her. Then I remember." He shook his head. "Six months, and I still reach over."

Rebecca said nothing. She reached for his hand instead, and after a moment's hesitation, he let her take it.

“I used to think faith would make it stop hurting,” he said. “When I first believed, back in the summer — I thought, okay. Now I know where they are. Now I know I’ll see them again. It’ll be easier.” He was quiet for a moment. “It’s not easier. It’s just… different. It hurts, but it isn’t hopeless anymore. Does that make any sense?”

“It makes perfect sense.” Rebecca opened her father’s Bible to a page she had worn soft from reading. “Paul wrote to the Thessalonians about this. They were grieving, too. Some of their people had died, and they were afraid they’d never see them again.” She found the verse with her finger. “‘*But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope.*’”

She looked up at him.

“He doesn’t say *don’t sorrow*,” she said. “He says don’t sorrow *like those who have no hope*. We still grieve, Ethan. We’re supposed to. Jesus stood outside Lazarus’s tomb and wept — and He knew He was about to raise him from the dead. Grief isn’t a lack of faith. It’s what love looks like when someone’s gone.”

Ethan looked at the stone for a long time.

“When did you get so wise?” he finally asked.

“I didn’t.” Rebecca smiled through the tears that had crept into her eyes. “I just read my dad’s margins.”

He laughed — a short, rough, surprised sound — and she laughed with him, there among the graves, with the cold wind moving through the red and gold leaves above them.

Then his face grew serious.

“There’s a town meeting tonight,” he said. “Daniel’s going to tell everyone about the broadcast. About the government. About Harlan’s Crossing.” He hesitated. “It’s going to be bad, Rebecca. People are scared. Some of them are going to start talking about Kane. About making a deal. Some of them are going to start talking about the man on the radio.”

“I know.”

“Daniel’s asked if you’d say something. After he’s finished. And Samuel.” He looked at her. “People listen to you. More than they listen to me. More than they listen to Daniel. You’ve got your father’s voice.”

Rebecca looked down at the worn Bible in her hands. At the margins crowded with her father’s handwriting. At the words he had written for her twenty years ago, when she was a rebellious girl who thought she knew everything.

Lord, let my Becky be among those who believe. Even if it is after I am gone.

“I don’t have my father’s voice,” she said softly. “I only have his Bible.”

“That’s enough,” Ethan said.

Down the hill, the rhythmic scrape of the shovels went on and on, cutting into the cold ground.

* * *

First Baptist Church

7:00 p.m.

They came by the hundreds.

They came on foot, on bicycles, in horse-drawn wagons and in the handful of trucks that still had fuel. They came from the farms and from the subdivisions on the north side of town, from the trailer park by the river and from the big Victorian houses on Maple Avenue. They came from the camp at the south gate, thin and ragged and wary, escorted by Jack's volunteers. They came carrying lanterns and flashlights and candles in mason jars, and they filled First Baptist Church to the walls — the pews, the aisles, the choir loft, the balcony, the foyer — and when there was no more room inside, they stood on the front steps and on the lawn and in the street, huddled in blankets and coats, waiting.

Ethan stood near the front, against the side wall beneath a stained-glass window of Christ the Good Shepherd, and watched them come.

He had grown up in this town. He knew most of these faces. The hardware store clerk. The high school football coach. The woman who used to cut his hair. The farmer who sold sweet corn from the back of his truck every August. He had arrested some of them, back when he wore a badge. He had given some of them CPR. He had gone to their weddings and their funerals and their kids' birthday parties.

He had never seen them look like this.

Thin. Pale. Hollow-eyed. Dressed in layers of mismatched clothing against the cold. Children sitting on laps because there were no seats left. Old men leaning against the walls because they could not stand without support.

But they had come. All of them. Because in a world without television or internet or telephones, a town meeting was the only way to know what was true.

At the pulpit, Mayor Daniel Brooks raised his hands, and the enormous crowd fell slowly silent.

He did not waste words. Ethan admired him for that. He told them exactly what had happened — the broadcast from Continuity Facility Seven, the voice of Major Thomas Albrecht, the words that could not be taken back. *There is no federal government. There is no help on the way. There is no one coming.*

He told them about Harlan's Crossing. About the convoy on Route 13. About Tom Mitchell, whom many of them had known.

He told them about the food. Hal Whitaker's numbers. The end of February. The middle of March, maybe, if they cut the rations again.

He told them about the influenza in the isolation ward.

When he finished, the silence in the sanctuary was so complete that Ethan could hear the kerosene lanterns hissing on the walls.

Then a woman somewhere in the balcony began to cry.

Then another voice, a man's, from the middle pews: "So what are we supposed to do?"

And then everyone was talking at once.

Ethan watched it happen the way he had once watched crowds at football games turn into fights. It started with fear and became anger. Voices rising. People standing. Questions shouted from every corner of the room.

"How are we supposed to feed fourteen hundred more people when we can't feed ourselves?"

"Close the gate! Send the refugees somewhere else!"

"Where? Where are they supposed to go?"

"That's not our problem!"

"They're *people*, for God's sake —"

"Then *you* feed them!"

"What about Kane? What happens when he comes here?"

A tall, heavyset man near the front stood up. Ethan recognized him — Russ Keller, who had managed the grain co-op for twenty years and now sat on the town's supply committee. Keller had a voice like a foghorn and the confidence of a man who had always been the most important person in whatever room he was in.

"I'll tell you what we're supposed to do," Keller boomed, and the room quieted a little. "We're supposed to *think*. We're supposed to use our heads instead of our hearts for once." He turned slowly, addressing the crowd. "Everybody's heard the broadcasts from Europe. That man is sending relief. Food. Medicine. Fuel. He says so every night. The only thing standing between us and that help is the fighting. The warlords. The chaos. He's said it himself — lay down your weapons, choose cooperation over chaos." He spread his hands. "Maybe it's time we listened. Maybe it's time we stopped acting like we can do this alone. Because we can't. You heard the mayor. By March, we're starving."

A murmur rolled through the crowd. Some people were nodding.

"And what about Kane?" someone shouted. "Are we supposed to cooperate with him too?"

Keller hesitated for just a moment. "I'm saying we keep our options open. That's all. I'm saying that maybe a man who controls eight towns and has twelve hundred people fed and warm behind his walls knows something about survival that we don't. Maybe we should at least *talk* to him before he —"

"Tom Mitchell talked to him," Hal Whitaker's voice cut across the room like a whip. The old farmer was standing at the back, his cap in his hands. "Now Tom Mitchell's dead, and his cattle are in Kane's barns. You want to talk to Kane, Russ? You go right ahead. You go on down Route 13 and knock on his gate. We'll bury what's left of you next to Tom."

The room erupted again.

Ethan pushed himself away from the wall. He didn't know what he was going to say. He only knew that someone had to say something before this crowd tore itself in half.

But before he could reach the front, a small figure stepped up beside Mayor Brooks at the pulpit.

Rebecca Whitfield.

She did not raise her hands. She did not shout. She simply stood there, small and straight in a faded wool coat, holding her father's Bible, and waited.

It took a long time. But one by one, the people nearest the front noticed her and fell silent. Then the people behind them. Then the balcony. Then the foyer.

Until at last the whole church was quiet again.

"Some of you knew my father," Rebecca said. Her voice was not loud, but it carried to every corner of the room. "Most of you didn't listen to him. I know I didn't." A few people shifted uncomfortably in the pews. "He stood right here, at this pulpit, for thirty-one years, and he told this town that a day was coming when the world would be turned upside down. When millions would disappear. When nations would rise against nations. When there would be famines and pestilences and wars. He told us the Bible predicted all of it."

She opened the Bible.

"'*For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places. All these are the beginning of sorrows.*' Matthew twenty-four." She looked up. "The *beginning* of sorrows. Not the end. We are living in the days my father preached about. Every one of you knows it now. You've seen it with your own eyes."

The silence was absolute.

"I'm not going to stand up here and tell you that everything will be fine," she continued. "It won't be. People are going to get sick. Some of them are going to die. We're going to be hungry this winter. And Marcus Kane is coming. I can't promise you any of that is going to change."

She paused.

"But I can tell you this. My father also preached something else from this pulpit — something just as true as all the warnings. He preached that God has not abandoned us. That even now, even here, even in the middle of all this darkness, He is still calling people home. '*The Lord is not slack concerning his promise… but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.*'"

Her voice softened.

"Six months ago, this church was nearly empty. Now look at it. Look around you." She swept her hand across the packed sanctuary. "God didn't leave Ashwood. He's been here the whole time. He's been in the clinic with Dr. Collins at three in the morning. He's been in Hal Whitaker's fields. He's been on the

courthouse roof with Ethan and Jack. He's been up on Hillside with Noah and those boys, digging graves in the cold because they love their neighbors enough to do the hardest thing there is."

Somewhere in the balcony, someone let out a sob.

"And I want to say one more thing." Rebecca's eyes found Russ Keller in the front row. She did not glare at him. She looked at him gently, almost sadly. "I know what the man on the radio says. I've heard him too. He sounds kind. He sounds wise. He promises food and medicine and peace and safety. And maybe some of what he's promising is even real."

She looked down at the Bible.

"But my father wrote something in the margin of this Bible years ago, next to First Thessalonians chapter five. He wrote: *False peace precedes true judgment. Watch for the peacemaker.*" She closed the book. "I don't know who that man is. I'm not going to pretend I do. But I know this: we will not survive this winter by trusting in any man. Not Marcus Kane. Not the man on the radio. Not even Mayor Brooks or Ethan Walker or Jack Reynolds, as much as I love and trust them." A ripple of quiet laughter moved through the room, and Brooks smiled ruefully. "'*Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm… Blessed is the man that trusteth in the LORD, and whose hope the LORD is.*' Jeremiah seventeen."

She stepped back from the pulpit.

"We'll ration the food. We'll care for the sick. We'll defend the town. We'll do everything we're supposed to do. But we'll do it on our knees."

For a long moment, no one spoke.

Then, from somewhere near the back of the sanctuary, an old woman's voice — thin and quavering but perfectly on pitch — began to sing.

"*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way, When sorrows like sea billows roll…*"

Ethan turned. It was Martha Kimble, Walt's wife, sitting wrapped in a quilt at the end of the last pew. Her voice cracked with the cough that had been plaguing her for a week, but she did not stop.

"*Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul.*"

Walt joined her. Then the woman beside them. Then the row in front. The song rolled forward through the sanctuary like a wave — from the back pews to the front, up into the balcony, out through the open doors into the foyer and down the steps to the crowd standing in the cold on the lawn. Hundreds of voices. Thousands. Some of them had never sung a hymn in their lives. Some of them hadn't been inside a church in twenty years. Some of them didn't know the words and just hummed.

"*It is well… with my soul… It is well, it is well with my soul.*"

Ethan did not realize he was singing until he felt the tears on his face.

Across the room, he saw Sarah Collins standing near the side door in her stained scrubs, her eyes closed, her lips moving. He saw Jack Reynolds in the back, arms folded, jaw clenched, not singing —

but not leaving, either. He saw Noah Simmons in the balcony with his arm around a crying refugee boy half his size. He saw Hal Whitaker with his cap pressed against his chest.

He saw Russ Keller in the front row, standing silently with his hands in his pockets, his face unreadable.

And he saw Rebecca Whitfield at the pulpit, her father's Bible clutched against her heart, singing with her eyes lifted toward the dark rafters as if she could see straight through them to heaven.

The Breaking of America had come to Ashwood.

But on this night, at least, Ashwood had not broken.

* * *

Walker Residence, Sycamore Street

11:48 p.m.

The house was cold and dark and quiet.

Ethan let himself in through the kitchen door and stood for a long moment in the darkness without lighting the lantern. He did this every night. He was not entirely sure why.

It was a small house. Three bedrooms, one bath, a sagging front porch and a backyard big enough for a swing set. Emily had picked it out eleven years ago, when they were newlyweds with no money and big dreams. She had painted every room herself. She had planted the rose bushes along the fence and the tulips by the mailbox. She had hung the wind chime on the back porch that still tinkled faintly on windy nights, so that sometimes, half asleep, he would hear it and think for one wild moment that she had come home.

He struck a match and lit the kerosene lamp on the kitchen table.

Everything was exactly as it had been. He had changed nothing. Emily's reading glasses on the windowsill above the sink. Her Bible on the counter by the coffee maker, a pink sticky note marking her place in Isaiah. Her favorite mug — *World's Okayest Gardener*, a joke gift from her sister — hanging on its hook.

And on the refrigerator, held up by a magnet shaped like a ladybug, a crayon drawing.

Four figures in front of a lopsided yellow house. A tall one in a blue uniform — *DADDY.* A tall one with long yellow hair — *MOMMY.* A small one in a pink dress — *ME.* And a fourth figure, taller than all the others, drawn in bright gold crayon with rays of light coming out of him in every direction, standing behind the family with his arms spread wide over all of them.

Beneath it, in careful, wobbly letters, his daughter had written:

JESUS KEEPS US SAFE

She had drawn it in Sunday school two weeks before she disappeared. She had brought it home and presented it to him with enormous ceremony, and he had said, *That's great, sweetheart,* and put it on

the fridge without really looking at it, because he'd had a long shift and a headache and a report to finish.

He looked at it now.

He looked at it for a long time.

Then Ethan Walker — former police lieutenant, former skeptic, Commander of the Ashwood Community Guard, a man who six months ago had mocked every prayer his wife ever prayed — sat down at his kitchen table in the lamplight, folded his hands, and bowed his head.

He did not have fancy words. He had never learned any.

"Lord," he said quietly, "I don't know how to do this. I don't know how to keep these people alive. I don't know how to feed them or heal them or protect them. Kane is coming. Winter's coming. The sickness is coming. And I'm just one man, and I'm tired, and I'm scared." He swallowed hard. "I'm not asking You to make it easy. I know it's not going to be easy. I just — I'm asking You to be with us. Be with Sarah in the clinic. Be with Jack and the boys on the wall. Be with Rebecca. Be with Daniel. Give Hal wisdom with the food. And Lord…" His voice broke. "Tell Emily I'm sorry I didn't listen. Tell her I'm listening now. Tell our girl her daddy loves her. Tell her I finally looked at the picture."

He sat in silence for a long time after that.

Outside, the wind picked up. The wind chime on the back porch began to sing softly in the dark.

And then, for the first time that season, the snow began to fall.

Ethan did not see it at first. He only noticed the change in the light — a faint silver glow at the kitchen window. He rose and pulled back the curtain.

Snowflakes. Big, soft, silent flakes drifting down out of the black sky, settling on the rose bushes and the swing set and the empty street beyond, turning the whole ruined world clean and white and quiet.

Winter had come to Ashwood.

He stood at the window, watching it fall, and a verse rose unbidden in his mind — one he had read only last week, in Emily's Bible, in the passage marked with the pink sticky note.

"*Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.*"

Isaiah one, verse eighteen.

He was still standing there when the radio on his belt crackled.

"*Reynolds to Walker. Ethan, you awake?*"

He keyed it. "I'm here, Jack."

"*Sorry to bother you. South gate just called up. We've got a woman out there. Came in alone off Route 13 about twenty minutes ago, half-frozen. Says she walked here from Columbus.*"

Ethan frowned. “We get people from Columbus every week, Jack. Put her in the camp. Sarah can check her in the morning.”

A pause. Static.

“*That’s the thing. She won’t go to the camp. Says her name is Rachel Monroe. Says she used to be a reporter. She’s asking for whoever’s in charge.*” Another pause. “*She’s got some papers with her, Ethan. Says she overheard Kane’s men on the road last night, and they were talking about us. And she says there’s something in those papers that you need to see. Tonight.*”

Ethan looked out the window at the falling snow.

Then he reached for his coat.

“*Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man.*”

— Luke 21:36

* * *

END OF CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 2

A House Divided

“*And if a kingdom be divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand.*”

— Mark 3:24–25

* * *

South Gate Guardhouse, Ashwood, Ohio

October 31 — 12:35 a.m.

The woman sitting beside the wood stove in the south gate guardhouse did not look like someone who had walked sixty miles.

She looked like someone who had walked six hundred.

Ethan stopped in the doorway and shook the snow from his coat. The guardhouse had been a tollbooth for the county fairgrounds once — a cramped plywood shack with a single window and a counter where teenagers had sold parking passes for five dollars. Now it held a cot, a gun rack, a field radio, and a battered potbelly stove that Jack’s volunteers kept glowing around the clock. Two of them stood by the counter now, rifles slung, watching the woman with a wariness Ethan understood. Strangers who asked for whoever was in charge were usually trouble.

She was maybe thirty-five, though it was hard to tell. Her dark hair was cropped short and ragged, as though she had cut it herself with a pocketknife. Her face was windburned and hollow. She wore a man's canvas barn coat three sizes too big, and her jeans were soaked black to the knees. Someone had given her a blanket and a tin cup of hot chicory, and she held the cup in both hands without drinking it.

In her lap, clutched against her stomach beneath the blanket, was a canvas satchel.

She looked up when he came in. Her eyes were gray, sharp, and utterly exhausted.

"You're Walker," she said. It wasn't a question.

"I'm Walker."

"The men on the road said Ashwood had an Army Ranger running things."

"That's Jack Reynolds. He runs the defense force. I run the Community Guard." Ethan pulled a folding chair across the floor and sat down facing her. "Between the two of us, we try to keep this town from getting killed. You're Rachel Monroe."

"I was. I'm not sure who I am anymore." She finally took a sip of chicory and grimaced. "What *is* this?"

"Roasted chicory root. Coffee ran out in June."

"It's terrible."

"You get used to it."

The corner of her mouth moved in what might, in some other life, have been a smile. Then it was gone.

"I heard them talking," she said. "Kane's men. Last night, at the crossroads on Route 13, about eight miles south of here. I was in a ditch. They had a convoy — cattle, a trailer full of something under tarps, a diesel pickup, riders on horses." She recited it the way a reporter reads back her notes. "They said Harlan's Crossing got what it asked for. They said Kane has taken seven towns, eight if you count Brinkley. And they said Ashwood is next."

"We know about Harlan's Crossing," Ethan said quietly.

"Did you know they called you Bible thumpers?"

"That, I didn't know." He shrugged. "They're not wrong."

She studied him for a moment, as if trying to decide whether he was joking. Then she set the cup down on the floor and pulled the satchel out from under the blanket.

"That's not why I'm here," she said. "Or it's not the only reason."

She unbuckled the satchel with fingers that were still stiff from the cold. Inside, wrapped in trash bags and oilcloth, was a thick sheaf of paper. She peeled back the plastic carefully, the way someone might unwrap a wounded animal, and drew out a single page. She held it toward the lamplight but did not hand it to him.

Ethan leaned forward.

The page was cream-colored and heavy, its upper edge browned and curled as though it had been in a fire. In the corner was a seal — a stylized globe encircled by twelve interlocking rings. Beneath it, in formal type:

FRAMEWORK FOR GLOBAL STABILIZATION AND RECOVERY

Draft Seven — Restricted Distribution

Contingency Planning Following a Sudden Large-Scale Population Loss Event

“Look at the date,” Rachel said.

He looked.

He read it twice. Then he looked up at her.

“That’s eleven weeks before —”

“Before the disappearances. Yes.” Her voice was very steady, the way people’s voices got steady when they had said something so many times that it no longer frightened them. “Eighty-seven pages. It describes exactly what would happen to the United States if millions of people vanished at once. The collapse of the federal government within ninety days. The breakdown of state authority. Regional warlords. Famine. It describes a coordinated international relief effort under a single oversight body. It describes the need for one leader who can — and I’m quoting — ‘command broad trust across ideological and national divisions.’” She paused. “And it has an appendix on how to discredit people who say the disappearances were the Rapture.”

The guardhouse was silent except for the crackle of the stove.

“Where did you get this?” Ethan asked.

“From a man named Howard Birch. Deputy director of emergency operations for the State of Ohio.” Rachel’s jaw tightened. “I’d been working a story on him for four months before everything happened. Contracts. Money moving between state agencies and a foundation in Geneva nobody could explain. He wouldn’t talk to me. Wouldn’t return a single call.” She looked down at the page. “Then, two hours after the bombs hit Columbus, he found me. I was in a parking garage on the east side, trying to get out of the city. He was burned. Badly. I don’t know how he was still walking. He pushed this satchel into my hands and said, ‘They knew. Tell someone they knew.’”

“And then?”

“And then he sat down against a concrete pillar and died.” She rewrapped the page with exaggerated care. “I’ve been carrying this for six months, Mr. Walker. I’ve been robbed twice. I nearly died of a fever in a barn in Delaware County. I’ve shown it to exactly three people. One of them laughed. One of them tried to take it from me. And one of them — an old farmer outside Sunbury — told me there was a town up north where the churches were full and people still told the truth, and if I wanted anyone to believe me, I should go there.”

She looked at him, and for the first time something cracked in the flat, steady voice.

“I don’t believe in God,” she said. “I want you to know that up front. I’m not here to join your church. But I have been watching the man on the radio for weeks. And behind him, on the wall of every broadcast, there’s a seal.” She tapped the satchel. “*This* seal.”

Ethan sat back slowly in the folding chair.

He thought of Rebecca in the pastor’s study, reading her father’s handwriting by candlelight. *False peace precedes true judgment. Watch for the peacemaker.* He thought of the voice on the radio, so warm and so reasonable. He thought of the appendix Rachel had described — *how to discredit people who say the disappearances were the Rapture* — and felt the hair rise on the back of his neck.

“*And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.*”

“You need a doctor,” he said at last. “And a bed, and something to eat that isn’t chicory. Dr. Collins will look at you in the morning. You’ll stay in town, not in the camp.”

“And the documents?”

“The documents stay with you.” He stood. “But tomorrow I’d like you to show them to a few people I trust. The mayor. Jack Reynolds. And a woman named Rebecca Whitfield.”

“The preacher’s daughter.” Rachel almost smiled again. “Even the raiders know about her.”

“Then you already know she’s worth talking to.”

He opened the door. Snow blew in across the threshold, white and swirling in the lamplight.

Rachel Monroe rose unsteadily to her feet, the satchel clutched against her chest, and looked out at the dark town beyond the gate. The church steeples. The candle still burning in the window of First Baptist.

“Walker,” she said. “Why do you believe me? You don’t know me. For all you know, I forged every page of this.”

Ethan considered that.

“Because six months ago,” he said, “I stood in the middle of my kitchen holding my wife’s empty clothes. And ever since then, I’ve found that the things that sound impossible are usually the ones that turn out to be true.”

* * *

North Checkpoint, State Route 39

October 31 — 9:20 a.m.

The motorcycle came out of the north just after nine, a mud-caked Kawasaki dirt bike with saddlebags strapped over the rear fender and a red jerry can bungeed to the handlebars. The volunteers at the north checkpoint heard it coming a full mile away. By the time it crested the last hill, six rifles were pointed at the road.

The rider slowed, stopped fifty yards short of the barricade, killed the engine, and raised both hands high above his head.

Then he did something none of them expected.

He laughed.

“Tell Jack Reynolds,” he called out, “that Daniel Mercer is still waiting on the twenty dollars he owes him from Kandahar.”

Twenty minutes later, Jack came down the highway in a mud-spattered Chevy pickup, jumped out before it had fully stopped, and walked straight up to the lean, bearded man standing beside the dirt bike. For a long moment the two of them simply looked at each other.

Then Jack threw his arms around him and pounded his back hard enough to raise dust from his coat.

“You’re supposed to be dead,” Jack said hoarsely.

“Disappointed?”

“A little.” Jack stepped back and looked him over. “Where have you been?”

“Everywhere,” Daniel Mercer said. “And you’re going to want to hear about all of it.”

* * *

The Courthouse Command Center

11:00 a.m.

The old county commissioners’ chamber on the second floor of the courthouse had become the nerve center of Ashwood.

The long walnut table where commissioners had once argued about zoning variances and snow-plow contracts was now buried under maps, rosters, ration ledgers, and radio logs. A hand-drawn map of the county, six feet wide, covered the entire east wall, stuck with colored pins — green for Ashwood’s farms, blue for checkpoints and observation posts, red for known threats. Over the summer the red pins had multiplied like a rash.

Mercer stood in front of that map now with a grease pencil in his hand, and the room went quiet.

Ethan had gathered the people who mattered. Mayor Brooks sat at the head of the table, polishing his glasses. Jack stood by the window. Sarah had come straight from the clinic, still in her scrubs, a mug of chicory steaming in front of her. Rebecca sat beside her with her father’s Bible closed on the table. Hal Whitaker sat at the far end, arms folded. Russ Keller sat near the door in his capacity as head of the supply committee, looking faintly annoyed at having been summoned. And in the corner, wrapped in a borrowed sweater with her satchel on her lap, sat Rachel Monroe, pale but upright, watching everything.

Mercer was forty-five, lean as a fence rail, with a close-cut graying beard and the kind of watchful stillness Ethan had seen in only a handful of men. Jack had given them the short version on the way up the stairs. Twenty-one years in Army Intelligence. Iraq, Afghanistan, two tours in places he still wasn’t allowed to name. Retired as a chief warrant officer to a cabin in the hills outside Marietta, where he’d planned to spend the rest of his life fishing and ignoring the news.

Then the world ended.

“I’ll be quick,” Mercer said. “Because I don’t think you’ve got a lot of time.”

He turned to the map.

“For the last five months, I’ve been moving. Ohio, Indiana, western Pennsylvania, a little bit of Kentucky and West Virginia. I’ve been through maybe a hundred and twenty towns. I’ve talked to mayors, sheriffs, militia leaders, preachers, farmers, refugees. I’ve sat in on negotiations. I’ve watched a couple of battles from a distance.” He tapped the map with the grease pencil. “And what I’ve seen is a pattern. The same pattern, everywhere I go.”

He drew a circle around Ashwood.

“Phase one. The collapse. That’s the first sixty days. Federal authority disappears. State authority disappears. Every town is on its own. Grocery stores emptied, pharmacies looted, gas stations dry. Most communities spent the summer just trying to stop the bleeding. Some didn’t make it. The ones that did, mostly did it the way you did — they closed their roads, organized a militia, and held on.”

He drew a series of lines outward from the circle, connecting it to the towns around it.

“Phase two. That’s where we are now. The towns that survived the summer are running out. Out of food. Out of fuel. Out of medicine. Out of clean water. Their wells are contaminated. Their livestock is dying. They’ve eaten their seed corn. And they’re looking at their neighbors and seeing grain bins and fuel tanks and pharmacies they didn’t loot fast enough.” He paused. “So they start making alliances. Two towns. Three. Five. They pool their fighters and their supplies. They sign agreements. They pick leaders. And then they look around and ask the obvious question — who’s got what we need, and who’s too weak to stop us from taking it?”

He turned and faced the table.

“I’ve seen it in eleven different places. Indiana has three major alliances already. Western Pennsylvania has four. Around Cincinnati, there’s something calling itself the Ohio River Republic that controls six counties and has a standing army of two thousand men. Down in the hills near the West Virginia line, the county sheriffs have formed a coalition, and they’re hanging looters from highway overpasses and calling it justice.”

Sarah closed her eyes.

“And here?” Mayor Brooks asked quietly.

Mercer uncapped the grease pencil and drew on the map. A thick line looped north of Ashwood, encompassing five small towns along State Route 39.

“The Tri-County Compact. Formed three weeks ago. Millbrook, Carverton, New Salem, Oak Hill, and Danby Junction. About eleven thousand people combined. They elected a council and a military commander. They’ve got maybe four hundred fighters.” He looked at Ethan. “The commander’s name is Carl Haskins.”

Ethan felt the words like a punch to the stomach.

“You know him?” Mercer asked.

“We played football together,” Ethan said slowly. “Four years. He was my center. I was the quarterback.” He swallowed. “He was the best man at my wedding.”

The room went very still.

Mercer nodded as if he had expected this. “It’s always like that. Every place I go. These aren’t foreign armies. They’re neighbors. Cousins. Old friends. People who went to the same high school and the same church and the same county fair.” He looked back at the map. “That’s what makes it so ugly. Nobody hates like people who used to love each other.”

He moved the grease pencil south and west, toward Iron Ridge, and drew a much larger, darker circle.

“And then there’s Kane.”

“We know about Kane,” Jack said.

“You know what Kane *has* done. I want to tell you what he’s *going* to do.” Mercer tapped the circle. “Kane isn’t like the others. The Tri-County Compact is a bunch of scared towns holding hands. Kane is building an army. A real one. Former Guard, former military, former law enforcement, and a lot of men who used to be in prison and aren’t anymore. He doesn’t ask towns to join him. He tells them. The ones that say yes get protection and rations. The ones that say no —” He shrugged. “You heard about Harlan’s Crossing.”

“What does he want?” Brooks asked.

“Everything within a hundred miles.” Mercer said it simply. “And he’s patient. He’s not going to hit you head-on. Not yet. He’s going to pick off the towns around you first, one at a time, until you’re an island. Then he’s going to make you an offer you can’t refuse.”

He capped the grease pencil and set it down.

“But here’s the part that keeps me up at night,” he said, and his voice dropped. “Phase three.”

Nobody spoke.

“The small alliances don’t last. They can’t. They fight each other. The strong ones swallow the weak ones. In a year — maybe less — you won’t have five hundred little towns in this part of the country. You’ll have ten or twelve regional powers. Warlords with armies. And those regional powers are going to be sitting at the table when the relief convoys finally come across the ocean.” He looked around the room. “Because that’s the endgame. Whoever brings the food is going to decide who gets it. And he’s not going to negotiate with a hundred towns. He’s going to negotiate with a dozen men who control everything. That’s how you consolidate a continent. You let it tear itself apart, and then you pick up the pieces.”

Rachel Monroe had gone very pale in the corner.

Mercer glanced at her, frowning. “Something wrong?”

For a moment she didn’t answer. Then she reached into the satchel, unwrapped the cover page, and slid it across the table toward him.

Mercer picked it up.

Ethan watched his face. He had been a cop for twelve years and had learned to read faces the way other men read newspapers. Mercer’s showed nothing at first — the professional blankness of a man trained to give nothing away. Then his eyes moved to the seal in the upper corner, and something changed.

The color drained out of him.

“Where did you get this?” he asked quietly.

“From a man who died giving it to me.”

Mercer set the page down very carefully on the table, as though it might break.

“I’ve seen this seal once before,” he said. “Nineteen months ago. A secure briefing at Fort Meade. I wasn’t cleared for it — I was there to deliver a threat assessment and got asked to stay for the next session because the guy who was supposed to brief it got food poisoning.” He shook his head slowly. “It was a presentation on a private international consortium. Very old money. Very quiet. Nobody would say where the funding came from. The analyst who briefed it thought they were building something — a framework, he called it — for managing a global crisis. He didn’t know what kind of crisis. Neither did anybody else in the room.”

He looked at Rachel.

“Two weeks later that analyst was reassigned to Guam. And the file was reclassified above my clearance.”

The room was absolutely silent.

It was Russ Keller who broke it.

“Oh, come on,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “Are we really doing this? Secret societies? Magic seals? We’ve got a food shortage and an influenza outbreak and a warlord twenty-six miles away, and we’re sitting here playing *X-Files* with some reporter who walked in out of the snow last night?” He gestured toward Rachel. “No offense, ma’am, but for all we know you printed that at a Kinko’s.”

“None taken,” Rachel said coolly. “Kinko’s closed in April.”

Jack snorted. Keller’s face reddened.

“Russ,” Mayor Brooks said mildly.

“No, Daniel, I’m serious. Look — I don’t doubt this man’s been places and seen things.” Keller nodded at Mercer. “But the one person on this whole planet who is actually *doing* something to help — the one person sending food and trying to stop the fighting — and now we’re supposed to believe he’s some kind of villain? Because of a picture on a piece of paper?” He shook his head. “Maybe I’m just a simple grain man. But when a man offers me bread, I don’t ask what kind of seal is on the wrapper.”

Rebecca spoke for the first time.

“Jesus was offered bread, too,” she said softly.

Keller turned toward her. “What?”

“In the wilderness. After forty days of fasting.” She did not open her Bible. She did not need to. “Satan came to Him and said, ‘*If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread.*’ He was starving, Mr. Keller. He had every right to eat. But He knew who was offering it.” She paused. “‘*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.*’”

Keller stared at her for a long moment. Then he shook his head, stood up, and pushed in his chair.

“With respect, Rebecca,” he said, “your daddy’s Bible isn’t going to feed nine thousand people in March.” He looked around the table. “I’ve got ration counts to finish. Let me know when you all decide to come back to the real world.”

The door closed behind him.

For a long moment nobody spoke.

“Well,” Hal Whitaker said finally, “that went well.”

Mercer looked at the door, then at Ethan. His eyes were thoughtful.

“Who’s that?”

“Russ Keller. Runs our supply committee. Managed the grain co-op for twenty years.”

“He always like that?”

“Mostly.” Ethan hesitated. “Why?”

Mercer shrugged and picked up the grease pencil again. “No reason,” he said. “Old habit. In my line of work, you learn to notice who leaves the room first.”

* * *

Hadley Bulk Fuel Plant, County Road 12

November 1 — 7:15 a.m.

The call came at dawn.

Ethan was already awake, sitting at his kitchen table with Emily’s Bible open to the Psalms, when his radio crackled with Luis Ortega’s quiet, steady voice.

“*Ortega to Walker. Commander, we’ve got a problem at the Hadley plant.*”

The Hadley Bulk Fuel Plant sat on a lonely stretch of County Road 12, exactly on the line between Ashwood and Millbrook. It had once supplied diesel and propane to half the farms in two counties — four squat white storage tanks behind a chain-link fence, a loading rack, and a cinderblock office with a faded Sunoco sign. When the grid went down in April, the tanks had still held almost thirty thousand gallons of diesel. Ashwood and Millbrook had both claimed it. For six months, under a handshake agreement between Ethan and Carl Haskins, they had split it — each town guarding the plant on

alternating weeks, each drawing exactly the same number of gallons every month, each keeping careful records.

It had been one of the last things in the county that still worked the way things used to.

Ethan came down County Road 12 in the Chevy with Jack beside him and Mercer in the back seat, and saw immediately that it didn't work anymore.

Three pickup trucks were parked nose-to-nose across the road in front of the plant's gate. Men with rifles crouched behind them. More men stood inside the chain-link fence — a dozen, maybe fifteen — and a flatbed truck with an empty fuel bladder strapped to its bed was backed up to the loading rack.

On the Ashwood side of the road, fifty yards away, Luis Ortega and eight volunteers had taken cover behind a stone farm wall and an overturned hay wagon. Their rifles were pointed at the trucks.

Nobody was shooting yet.

Ethan stopped the Chevy behind the stone wall and got out slowly. Ortega met him, crouching low.

"They came in about five," Ortega said. His voice was calm, but his eyes were hard. "Overran our two guys on the night shift. Nobody hurt — they just took their rifles and walked them out the gate. Then they backed that flatbed up and started pumping." He nodded toward the plant. "Commander, they're not taking their share. They're taking all of it."

"Millbrook?"

"Millbrook. And some others. There's trucks from Carverton and Oak Hill." Ortega paused. "Carl Haskins is with them."

Ethan looked across the road.

He saw Carl immediately. You couldn't miss him. Carl Haskins had been six foot four and two hundred and sixty pounds in high school, and he had not gotten any smaller. He stood beside the lead pickup truck in a Carhartt coat and a blaze-orange hunting cap, a scoped deer rifle cradled in his arms, and he was looking straight back at Ethan across fifty yards of frozen gravel.

For a moment neither of them moved.

Ethan thought of a hundred Friday nights under the stadium lights. Of Carl's big hands snapping the ball back to him on third and long. Of Carl standing beside him at the altar in a rented tuxedo that was too tight across the shoulders, whispering, *Don't pass out, Walker. She's way out of your league, but she said yes anyway.* Of Carl sitting in the front row at the hospital the night Ethan's daughter was born, holding a pink teddy bear the size of a fire hydrant.

He had not seen Carl since August.

"I'm going to talk to him," Ethan said.

"Bad idea," Jack said.

"Probably." Ethan unslung his rifle and handed it to him. "Cover me."

“Ethan —”

But Ethan was already stepping out from behind the stone wall, his hands open and empty at his sides, walking slowly down the middle of County Road 12.

He heard the rifles behind the Millbrook trucks shift toward him. He kept walking.

Twenty yards from the trucks, Carl Haskins said something to the men behind him, handed his rifle to one of them, and came out to meet him.

They stopped ten feet apart in the middle of the road.

Up close, Carl looked terrible. His face, always round and ruddy, had gone gray and slack. His eyes were bloodshot. There was a week’s stubble on his jaw. He had lost weight — not as much as some people, but enough that the Carhartt coat hung loose.

“Walker,” he said.

“Carl.”

“Didn’t figure you’d come out yourself.”

“Didn’t figure you’d break our deal.”

Carl’s jaw worked. He looked away, toward the white tanks behind the fence, then back.

“I didn’t have a choice.”

“You always have a choice, Carl.”

“No.” Carl’s voice cracked, just slightly. “No, I don’t. Not anymore.” He took a deep breath. “You know what’s happening in Millbrook, Ethan? You have any idea? The well on the east side got contaminated in September. Runoff from the Johnson hog farm after the lagoon broke. We didn’t know until people started getting sick. Dysentery. We’ve buried forty-one people since the first of October. Eleven of them were kids.” His voice broke fully now. “Eleven kids, Ethan. My sister’s youngest was one of them. Four years old. Same age your girl was.”

Ethan felt the words go into him like a knife.

“We got no doctor,” Carl went on. “Doc Harmon died in August. We got no antibiotics. We boil the water, but we don’t have enough firewood to boil enough of it. We need to run the generators to pump from the deep wells on the west side, and the generators need diesel. And the council — the Compact — they voted. Five towns, Ethan. Eleven thousand people. They said the diesel goes to whoever needs it most.” He wiped his face roughly with the back of his hand. “And right now, that’s us.”

“You could have asked,” Ethan said quietly.

“We did ask! We sent a rider to your mayor in September. You know what he said? He said Ashwood couldn’t spare it. Said you needed every gallon for your tractors and your generators and your clinic.” Carl’s face twisted. “Your *clinic*. You got a doctor, Ethan. You got a real, live doctor, and medicine, and a hospital in your high school gym, and we’re burying babies in the churchyard because we can’t keep the water clean.”

Ethan didn’t know about the rider. He felt a slow, sick heat rising in his chest. *Daniel, why didn’t you tell me?* Or had Daniel ever been told? The message could have gone anywhere. To the supply committee. To —

He pushed the thought aside.

“Carl,” he said. “Listen to me. Let’s stop this. Right now. Nobody’s been shot yet. Let’s keep it that way.” He took a slow step forward. “Take your half. Take your half of what’s left, the way we always agreed. And then come back to Ashwood with me — today — and talk to Sarah Collins. She’s the doctor. I’ll bring her to Millbrook myself. She’ll look at your well. She’ll look at your sick. We’ll send you what medicine we can spare. It won’t be much. But it’ll be something.”

Carl stared at him.

“You’d do that?”

“I’d do that.”

“Why?”

Ethan hesitated. Then he told him the truth.

“Because six months ago I wouldn’t have,” he said. “Six months ago I’d have told you Millbrook’s problems were Millbrook’s problems, and I’d have been right, and it wouldn’t have mattered. But I’ve been reading a book this summer, Carl. Emily’s book. And there’s a part in it where a man asks Jesus, ‘*Who is my neighbour?*’ And Jesus tells him a story about a man lying beaten on the side of the road, and all the good religious people walk right past him. And the one who stops to help him is a man from the town next door — a man everybody in that country hated.” He spread his hands. “You’re my neighbor, Carl. You always have been.”

For a long moment, Carl Haskins said nothing at all.

Ethan watched something move across his old friend’s face — something that looked like grief, and shame, and a desperate, fragile hope. Carl’s shoulders sagged. He opened his mouth to speak.

And then a shot cracked across the frozen field.

It came from behind the Millbrook trucks. Ethan never learned exactly who fired it — whether it was a nervous kid from Carverton with his finger on the trigger, or a hothead from Oak Hill who wanted the fight, or simply an accident, a slipped grip in the cold. It didn’t matter.

The bullet struck the stone wall behind Ethan, three feet from where Luis Ortega was crouching, and sprayed chips of limestone across the road.

And the Ashwood side fired back.

“*Hold your fire!*” Ethan roared, spinning around, arms raised. “*Hold your fire! HOLD!*”

Beside him, Carl was screaming the same thing at his own men.

For three seconds, maybe four, the air was full of gunfire — the flat crack of deer rifles, the boom of a shotgun, glass shattering in a truck windshield, the sharp ring of a bullet ricocheting off one of the white steel fuel tanks.

Then Jack Reynolds's voice cut across all of it like a thunderclap — "*CEASE FIRE! CEASE FIRE! CEASE FIRE!*" — and the Ashwood rifles fell silent, and after a moment, so did the rest.

In the silence that followed, Ethan heard someone screaming.

It was coming from behind the Millbrook trucks.

Carl was already running. Ethan ran after him without thinking.

Behind the lead pickup, a boy lay on his back in the gravel. He couldn't have been older than seventeen. He had a blaze-orange hat like Carl's and a skinny, freckled face, and he was clutching his left thigh with both hands while bright red blood pumped out between his fingers and spread in a dark pool across the frozen ground.

"*Danny!*" Carl dropped to his knees beside him. "Danny, look at me — look at me, buddy —"

"It hurts, Uncle Carl — it *hurts* —"

Uncle Carl.

Ethan knelt on the other side of the boy, tore off his own belt, and cinched it around the thigh above the wound as tightly as he could. The boy screamed. The bleeding slowed but didn't stop. Femoral artery, maybe. Maybe not. If it was, the kid had minutes.

"*Jack!*" Ethan bellowed over his shoulder. "*Get the truck! We need Sarah! Now!*"

"He's not going to Ashwood." A man behind Carl — tall, gaunt, with a Carverton Volunteer Fire Department patch on his coat and a rifle in his hands — was staring down at Ethan with naked hatred. "You shot him. Your people shot him. You think we're going to hand him over to you?"

"He'll *die* if you don't!" Ethan shouted. "Your nearest doctor is forty miles away! Ours is ten minutes! Carl — Carl, *listen to me* —"

Carl looked up. His face was streaked with tears and his hands were red with his nephew's blood.

"Let him go," Carl whispered to the man from Carverton. Then, louder: "*Let him go!* Load him in Walker's truck! *Now!*"

* * *

Ashwood High School — Community Clinic

8:04 a.m.

Sarah Collins worked on Danny Haskins for three hours on the stainless steel table beneath the car headlamps, with Megan Torres at her side and the last two bags of O-negative blood the town possessed hanging from an IV pole made out of a coat rack.

It was not the femoral artery. It was a branch of it. That was the only reason he lived.

When Sarah finally came out from behind the bedsheet curtain, peeling off her gloves, Carl Haskins was sitting on the bottom row of the bleachers with his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. He had not moved in three hours. Ethan was sitting beside him. Neither of them had said a word.

Carl looked up.

“He’ll keep the leg,” Sarah said. “If it doesn’t get infected. I used almost the last of our ciprofloxacin. He needs to stay here for at least a week. After that, you can take him home.”

Carl stared at her. Then he put his face back in his hands, and his enormous shoulders began to shake.

Sarah looked at Ethan. He nodded to her, very slightly. She nodded back and went to wash up.

After a long time, Carl lifted his head and wiped his face on his sleeve.

“Thank you,” he said roughly.

“Thank Sarah.”

“I will.” Carl stared across the gymnasium at the rows of cots, at the scoreboard still reading **HOME 0 — GUEST 0**. “I used to sit up there,” he said, pointing at the top of the bleachers. “Remember? Before the games. Me and you. You’d be so nervous you’d throw up in the locker room, and I’d have to talk you down.”

“I remember.”

“Seems like a hundred years ago.”

“Seems like about six months.”

Carl almost laughed. Then his face closed.

“Ethan,” he said, “the fuel’s gone. My people pumped all of it before the shooting started. It’s halfway to Millbrook by now.” He looked at his bloody hands. “And I can’t give it back. Even if I wanted to. The Compact won’t let me. They’ll replace me with somebody who’ll do what they say. Probably Ray Talbot. The guy from Carverton, with the rifle.” He shook his head. “And Ray Talbot hates Ashwood worse than Kane does.”

“Then let’s go to the Compact together,” Ethan said. “You and me. Sarah. We’ll offer them medical help. We’ll help them fix the well.”

“You don’t understand.” Carl’s voice dropped to a whisper. “They don’t want your help. Not anymore. Not after today. A kid from Millbrook got shot by Ashwood rifles. Doesn’t matter who fired first. Doesn’t matter that your doctor saved him. By tonight, every house in five towns is going to be saying Ashwood shot Carl Haskins’s nephew over a tank of diesel.” He looked at Ethan with red, exhausted eyes. “They’ve been saying for weeks that you’re hoarding. That you’ve got a doctor and medicine and grain and you won’t share. That you think you’re better than everybody else because you’ve got God on your side. Now they’ve got proof.”

Ethan said nothing.

“I’m sorry,” Carl said. “I’m sorry for all of it. I’m sorry for the fuel and I’m sorry for the shooting. And I’m sorry for what’s coming.” He stood up slowly, his knees cracking. “But I can’t stop it. Not anymore. The Compact voted two days ago, Ethan. Before any of this. If Ashwood doesn’t agree to share its grain and its medicine with the Compact — on the Compact’s terms — they’re going to come take it.”

Ethan stood too.

“And you’d come with them?”

Carl looked at him for a long, long time.

“I got four hundred people in Millbrook who count on me,” he said at last. “My sister buried her baby girl in September. I got eleven little graves in the churchyard. What would you do?”

Ethan didn’t have an answer.

Carl turned and walked slowly across the gymnasium floor toward the stage where his nephew lay behind the bedsheet curtain. Halfway there, he stopped and looked back.

“You were right, you know,” he said. “About being neighbors.” His voice was barely audible. “That’s what makes it so bad.”

* * *

First Baptist Church — Fellowship Hall

November 1 — 7:30 p.m.

By nightfall, the story had reached every house in Ashwood.

It had grown in the telling, as stories always did. By noon, Millbrook had stolen all the diesel. By two o’clock, Millbrook had attacked the fuel plant and shot at Luis Ortega. By suppertime, Ashwood’s volunteers had been ambushed, and the only reason they’d survived was that Ethan Walker had bravely walked out into the crossfire. Some people said a Millbrook boy was dead. Some said three were. Some said Carl Haskins had pulled a gun on Ethan in the middle of the road and Jack Reynolds had talked him down. Almost none of it was true.

But all of it was believed.

The Wednesday night Bible study in the fellowship hall of First Baptist was usually the most peaceful hour of Rebecca Whitfield’s week. Sixty or seventy people, sometimes a hundred, sitting in folding chairs in the long, low-ceilinged basement room, with kerosene lanterns hissing on the tables and a big pot of weak coffee on the wood stove. They sang a hymn or two. Samuel Graves prayed. And then Rebecca opened her father’s Bible and taught from his notes, the way he had taught in this same room for thirty-one years.

Tonight, there were two hundred people crammed into the fellowship hall. And they were not peaceful.

“I’m just saying,” said Gary Voss, a stocky man in a John Deere jacket who ran a dairy farm north of town, “that we can’t feed everybody. That’s all I’m saying. We can’t feed fourteen hundred people in

the camp *and* nine thousand people in town *and* now the whole Tri-County Compact on top of it. At some point, we've got to take care of our own."

"The refugees *are* our own now," said Donna Pierce sharply. "They live here. They work the fields. Half the corn Hal Whitaker brought in last month was picked by people from that camp."

"And eaten by them, too."

"*Gary!*"

"I'm sorry, Donna, but somebody's got to say it! My family's getting the same rations as some stranger who wandered in from Mansfield three days ago with a cough and a bag of canned peaches. How's that fair?"

"Maybe it's not *fair*," said a young mother near the back, a refugee from Marion with a baby on her hip. Her voice shook. "Maybe it's *grace.* Isn't that what you people are always talking about in here?"

The room exploded.

Rebecca sat at the front table with her father's Bible open in front of her and listened to them — farmers against refugees, old families against newcomers, people who wanted to open the gate against people who wanted to shut it, people who trusted the man on the radio against people who feared him — and felt something inside her grow very quiet and very sad.

Two weeks ago, these people had been praying together in this room.

Now they were shouting at each other across it.

Beside her, Samuel Graves leaned over, his cane across his knees.

"You going to let them go on like this?" he murmured.

"I don't know how to stop them."

"Your daddy would've known."

"My daddy would have stood up and preached for forty-five minutes until they were too tired to fight." Rebecca almost smiled. "I don't have forty-five minutes of anything in me tonight, Samuel."

The old man chuckled. Then he reached over, took her father's Bible gently out of her hands, and flipped through the thin, soft pages with his gnarled fingers until he found what he was looking for. He slid it back in front of her and tapped a verse with one crooked finger.

She read it.

Then she read it again.

In the margin beside it, in her father's familiar blue ink, Caleb Whitfield had written: *This is where it always begins. Not in the palaces. In the houses. — C.W.*

Rebecca stood up.

She did not say anything. She simply stood there at the front of the fellowship hall with the Bible in her hands and waited, the way she had waited at the town meeting. And again, slowly, the shouting died away.

“I want to read you something,” she said. “It’s from Matthew ten. Jesus is sending out His disciples, and He’s warning them about what’s going to happen. About what the world is going to be like.” She looked down at the page.

“‘*Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man’s foes shall be they of his own household.’*”

The fellowship hall was silent.

“My father wrote something next to that verse,” Rebecca said. “He wrote, *This is where it always begins. Not in the palaces. In the houses.*” She looked up at them. “I used to think the end of the world would come from the outside. Bombs. Armies. Antichrist. And all of that is coming — some of it is already here. But I think Dad was right. I think the thing that destroys us first isn’t Marcus Kane, or the Compact, or the man on the radio. It’s this.” She gestured at the room. “Right here. Neighbors turning on neighbors. Brothers against brothers. Christians against Christians. ‘*If a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand.’*”

Gary Voss shifted uncomfortably in his chair. The young mother from Marion looked down at her baby.

“I’m not going to tell you that you’re wrong to be afraid,” Rebecca said. “Gary, you’re right. We can’t feed everybody. That’s true. Donna, you’re right too. The refugees are our own now. That’s also true. We’re going to have to make some terrible decisions this winter, and some of them are going to break our hearts.” She paused. “But we have to make them *together.* On our knees. Not at each other’s throats.”

She closed the Bible.

“The world outside these walls is coming apart. Mr. Mercer says the whole country is breaking into pieces — alliances, warlords, armies. Towns that used to play each other in football are shooting each other over diesel fuel. That’s what the world does when it doesn’t have Christ.” Her voice softened. “But we do. And Jesus said, ‘*By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.*’ Not if we have the most grain. Not if we have the strongest walls. If we have *love.*”

For a long moment, no one spoke.

Then Gary Voss slowly stood up. He turned around, crossed the room, and stopped in front of the young refugee mother from Marion. She looked up at him, startled and a little afraid.

“What’s your name, ma’am?” he asked gruffly.

“Kayla. Kayla Brennan.”

“Kayla.” Gary cleared his throat. “I got two Jersey cows that are still milking. My wife’s been making butter. It isn’t much.” He looked at the baby. “But that little one ought to have some. You come by the farm tomorrow. North on Route 39, past the Lutheran church. Can’t miss it.”

Kayla Brennan stared at him. Then she burst into tears.

Gary Voss, red-faced and deeply embarrassed, patted her awkwardly on the shoulder and went back to his seat.

Nobody said anything for a long time.

And then Samuel Graves, leaning on his hickory cane, pushed himself slowly to his feet and began to pray.

* * *

The Courthouse Roof

11:20 p.m.

The snow had stopped. The clouds had broken apart, and the stars had come out cold and hard above the town.

Ethan found Daniel Mercer on the courthouse roof, sitting on an overturned bucket against the parapet with a pair of binoculars in his lap and a wool blanket around his shoulders, looking north toward Millbrook.

“Jack said you’d be up here,” Ethan said.

“Jack’s a smart man.” Mercer didn’t look away from the horizon. “You can see their fires from here. Millbrook. Carverton. Oak Hill. See?” He pointed. Far to the north, faint orange sparks glowed on the dark horizon like dying embers. “They’re burning something. Probably their dead. Hard to bury people when the ground starts freezing.”

Ethan sat down on the parapet beside him.

“How’s the kid?” Mercer asked.

“Sarah says he’ll live.”

“And your friend?”

“Went home at sundown. He’ll be back to see Danny tomorrow.” Ethan was quiet for a moment. “He says the Compact voted to come for our grain. Before the shooting. Before any of it.”

“I know,” Mercer said. “I’ve been listening to their radio traffic all evening. They’re not even using codes.” He shook his head. “Amateurs. But dangerous amateurs. Four hundred men who are scared of watching their kids die. That makes them more dangerous than Kane’s professionals in some ways. Professionals know when to quit.”

Ethan looked north at the distant fires.

“Twenty years ago,” he said, “Carl Haskins and I drove to Myrtle Beach together for senior week. We slept on the beach because we couldn’t afford a hotel. He saved my life that week. Pulled me out of a rip current.” He shook his head slowly. “And today his nephew almost bled to death because somebody on my side of the road pulled a trigger.”

“Somebody on *his* side pulled one first.”

“Does it matter?”

Mercer thought about that for a long moment. “No,” he admitted. “Not to the people burying their dead.”

They sat in silence.

“I’ve seen this before,” Mercer said finally. “Not here. Overseas. Bosnia, in the nineties — I was a young analyst, fresh out of training. Iraq, after the invasion. Afghanistan. It’s always the same. First the government collapses. Then the neighbors start looking at each other. And somewhere along the way, a Serb who went to school with a Croat, who played soccer with him every Saturday for twenty years, picks up a rifle and shoots him in his own front yard.” He took a breath. “I used to think it happened because of hatred. Old grudges. Ethnic tensions. Religion. But it isn’t hatred, Ethan. Not at first. It’s *fear*. It’s a man looking at his children and thinking, *there isn’t enough for all of us.* Once a man believes that — really believes it — he’ll do anything.”

“*There isn’t enough,*” Ethan repeated softly.

“That’s the lie at the bottom of all of it.” Mercer shrugged. “Maybe it isn’t even a lie. Maybe there really isn’t enough.”

Ethan thought of Hal Whitaker’s numbers. The end of February. The middle of March.

Then he thought of something else. A passage Rebecca had read at Bible study two weeks ago. Five thousand men, not counting women and children, sitting on a grassy hillside in Galilee. Five loaves. Two fish. And a boy who had given up his lunch.

“*And they did all eat, and were filled: and they took up of the fragments that remained twelve baskets full.*”

“Maybe,” he said quietly. “Or maybe we’ve just been counting wrong.”

Mercer turned and looked at him for the first time. His face was unreadable in the starlight.

“Jack told me you’d gotten religion.”

“Jack says a lot of things.”

“He also told me he’s been going to Bible study for eleven weeks.” Mercer shook his head in something like wonder. “Jack Reynolds. In a Bible study. If you’d told me that in Kandahar, I’d have had you evaluated.” He was quiet for a moment. “I’m not a believer, Ethan. Never have been. Too many years watching people kill each other in God’s name. But I’ll say this. In five months and a hundred and twenty towns, I’ve seen a lot of people hold on. I’ve seen strong walls. Big armies. Smart leaders.” He nodded down toward the fellowship hall of First Baptist, where lantern light still glowed

in the basement windows. “But this is the only place I’ve been where people are still giving away butter.”

Ethan smiled faintly. “You heard about that?”

“Whole town’s heard about that.” Mercer almost smiled back. Then his face grew grim. “There’s one more thing I need to tell you. I didn’t want to say it in front of the others. Not yet. Not until I’m sure.”

Ethan waited.

“Three weeks ago, I got close to Iron Ridge,” Mercer said. “Closer than I should have. I lay in a tree line for two days watching the south side of Kane’s wall with a spotting scope.” He lowered his voice. “Ethan, he’s got artillery.”

Ethan went cold.

“Two M119 howitzers. One-oh-five millimeter. From the National Guard armory in Mansfield — I’d bet my life on it. The armory was supposed to have been secured in April. Somebody walked them out the back door.” Mercer’s jaw tightened. “And I watched his people drilling on them. They know what they’re doing. Somebody over there used to be a real artilleryman.”

“What’s the range?”

“Seven miles. Maybe a little more, depending on the ammunition.” Mercer turned and looked at the town spread out below them — the courthouse, the churches, the high school clinic, the grain elevator, all silver and silent under the stars. “Close enough to hit anything you’ve got from outside anywhere your patrols can reach. Your walls won’t matter. Your checkpoints won’t matter. He doesn’t have to come into Ashwood to destroy it.” He paused. “He just has to get close.”

Ethan stared north toward the dying fires of Millbrook. Then south and west, toward the darkness where Iron Ridge lay.

The Compact to the north. Kane to the south. Eleven thousand frightened people on one side. An army with artillery on the other.

And Ashwood in the middle.

He thought of Carl Haskins’s bloody hands. Of Gary Voss patting a weeping refugee on the shoulder. Of the fellowship hall full of neighbors who had been screaming at each other an hour before they bowed their heads together to pray.

A house divided against itself cannot stand.

“Does Jack know?” he asked.

“I’m telling him in the morning.”

“And the mayor?”

“That’s your call.” Mercer stood and folded the blanket over his arm. “But if I were you, Ethan, I’d be careful who hears it. In a town full of frightened people, fear travels fast.” He looked at the dark street

below, where a single figure was walking slowly home from the church in the starlight — a big, heavyset man in a co-op jacket, his hands shoved in his pockets. “And so does information.”

He went down through the roof hatch and was gone.

Ethan sat alone on the parapet for a long time after that, watching the fires burn out one by one along the northern horizon, until the only light left in all that darkness was the stars.

Then he bowed his head.

“*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!*”

Psalm 133. Emily’s handwriting in the margin: *Pray this for our town.*

So he did.

* * *

END OF CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 3

The Last County Line

“*The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed… He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh.*”

— Psalm 2:2, 4

* * *

Iron Ridge, Ohio

November 3 — 5:45 a.m.

The steel mill whistle still worked.

It was the first thing Marcus Kane had repaired after the world ended — before the wall, before the barracks, before the generators. The Hollister Steel Works had blown that whistle at 5:45 every morning for ninety-four years, calling three generations of Iron Ridge men to the furnaces. When the mill closed in 2009, the whistle went silent, and the town had begun to die with it.

Now it screamed again, long and shrill across the frozen dawn, and twelve hundred people rose from their beds because Marcus Kane had told them to.

He stood on the loading dock of the old rolling mill with his hands clasped behind his back and watched them come.

They came out of the barracks first — the long brick warehouse where the fighting men slept, two hundred and eighty of them now, their boots pounding on the frozen gravel as they formed up in ranks on the old employee parking lot. Behind them came the work crews: men and women in patched

coveralls heading for the gardens, the livestock pens, the machine shop, the smokehouse, the laundry. Behind them came the children, walking in neat lines toward the old union hall, which had become the school. Nobody was late. Nobody straggled. Nobody talked out of turn.

Six months ago Iron Ridge had been a dying town of four thousand, half of them on disability, a third of them on something worse. Its main street had been a row of pawnshops, vape stores, and payday lenders. Its police department had consisted of four officers and a K-9 named Duke. Its churches were closing one by one.

Now it was the strongest community in north-central Ohio.

Marcus had done that.

“Formation’s ready, Colonel.”

Dutch Kessler stood at the foot of the loading dock stairs. Marcus nodded and came down.

He walked the ranks slowly, the way his first sergeant had walked them at Camp Grayling twenty-five years ago. He looked at every face. He knew most of their names. Former Guardsmen — forty-two of them, the core of everything, men who had served with him or under him or knew someone who had. Former cops, deputies, prison guards. Hunters. Mechanics. Truck drivers. And the others — the men Kessler had pulled out of the county jail in May, after the sheriff fled and the guards walked off, and the men who had drifted in from Mansfield and Columbus with prison tattoos on their necks and nothing to lose.

Marcus did not care what they had been. He cared what they were now.

He stopped in front of a young man in the third rank. Nineteen, maybe twenty. Freckled. Nervous. He wore a new-issue woodland camouflage jacket from the armory stores, still creased from the packaging, and he was trying very hard to stand at attention.

“Name,” Marcus said.

“Pr-Private Evan Lowe, sir.”

“Where are you from, Lowe?”

“Harlan’s Crossing, sir.”

Marcus studied him. “You were there when we came.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You saw what happened to your mayor.”

The boy’s throat worked. “Yes, sir.”

“And you took the oath anyway.”

“Yes, sir.” A pause. Then, barely audible: “My mom and my little sisters are still there, sir. Sergeant Hendricks said as long as I serve, they get full rations.”

“Sergeant Hendricks told you the truth.” Marcus stepped closer, so that only the boy could hear him. “I want you to understand something, Lowe. I don’t enjoy what happened to Harlan’s Crossing. Your mayor was a stubborn fool, and stubborn fools get people killed. He had a choice. He could have fed his town. Instead he chose his pride.” He held the boy’s eyes. “I am never going to ask you to love me. I’m going to ask you to obey me. And as long as you do, your mother and your sisters will eat, and they will be warm, and nobody will ever hurt them. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.” Marcus stepped back. “Welcome to Iron Ridge, Private.”

He moved on down the line. Behind him he heard the boy let out a long, shaky breath.

* * *

After formation, Marcus walked to the south end of the compound, where the old slag yard had been bulldozed flat and fenced with razor wire.

The artillery section was already at work.

Two M119A3 howitzers sat side by side on the frozen gravel, their long barrels pointed south toward an empty hillside two miles away. They were beautiful weapons — lean and gray and deadly, lighter than they looked, each one capable of hurling a thirty-three-pound high-explosive shell more than seven miles. Marcus had seen them fire in training more times than he could count. He had never imagined he would own two of them.

Crouched beside the nearer gun, adjusting the sight with the tenderness of a man tuning a violin, was Staff Sergeant Wade Tolliver.

Tolliver was fifty-one, bald as an egg, with a gray handlebar mustache and forearms like hams. He had spent twenty-two years in field artillery, including three combat tours, before retiring to a trailer outside Mansfield to fix lawn mowers and drink. He had been the one who told Marcus, back in late April, exactly which door at the Mansfield armory was unguarded, exactly how many rounds were stored in the ammunition bunker, and exactly how long it would take to hitch the guns to a pair of stolen Dodge Rams and drive them out through the back lot.

It had taken eleven minutes.

“Morning, Colonel.” Tolliver didn’t look up. “Crews are getting good. Real good. Did a full emplacement drill yesterday in four minutes, forty seconds. Regular Army standard’s five.”

“Ammunition?”

“Hundred and sixty-two HE rounds. Forty illumination. Twenty-two smoke.” Tolliver finally stood, wiping his hands on a rag. “Enough for one good fight, sir. Not two. Not unless we find more.”

“We’ll find more.”

“Yes, sir.” Tolliver followed Marcus’s gaze south. “You mind me asking where we’re pointing these, Colonel? Men are starting to talk.”

Marcus didn’t answer right away. He looked out past the barrels, past the empty hillside, toward the northeast, where the land rolled away in long brown ridges toward the horizon.

“How far is Ashwood from the old Grange hall on County Road 7?” he asked.

Tolliver pulled a folded topographic map from the cargo pocket of his trousers, studied it for a moment, and ran a thick finger across it.

“Six point two miles to the courthouse, sir. Give or take.”

“And from the Grange hall, what can you hit?”

Tolliver looked at the map for a long time. When he looked up, something in his face had changed.

“Anything I want, sir,” he said quietly. “The whole town.”

Marcus nodded slowly.

“Keep drilling,” he said.

* * *

Pike’s Mill, Ohio — The County Line

November 3 — 10:30 a.m.

The hamlet of Pike’s Mill sat in a narrow valley where Sugar Run Creek crossed the old county line — a dozen white farmhouses, a gristmill with a wooden waterwheel that still turned, a harness shop, a one-room schoolhouse, and a plain white meetinghouse with no steeple and no cross. Most of the families were Mennonite. They had farmed this valley for a hundred and forty years without electricity or telephones or tractors. When the grid collapsed in April, Pike’s Mill had barely noticed.

It was, Marcus thought as he rode down the hill at the head of a column of forty mounted men and two pickup trucks, the most valuable piece of land within fifty miles.

Horses. Mules. A working mill that could grind a thousand pounds of grain a day without a drop of fuel. Families who knew how to plow, plant, harvest, butcher, smoke, can, and preserve without a single machine. In a world where the machines had stopped, the people of Pike’s Mill were the richest people in Ohio.

And they sat exactly on the last county line between Iron Ridge and Ashwood.

The column clattered across the creek bridge and halted in the gravel lane in front of the meetinghouse. Faces appeared in farmhouse windows. A woman in a dark dress and white prayer covering, hanging laundry in a side yard, gathered up two small children and hurried them inside.

Marcus dismounted.

A man was already walking toward him down the lane. He was old — seventy-five at least — with a long white beard and no mustache, a black broad-brimmed hat, and a plain dark coat fastened with hooks instead of buttons. He walked with a stick but did not lean on it. Behind him, at a respectful distance, came four younger men in the same plain clothes. None of them carried weapons.

The old man stopped a few feet from Marcus and looked up at him with calm, pale blue eyes.

“Good morning,” he said. “I am Jacob Brenneman. I am the bishop of this community. You are welcome here.” He glanced at the forty mounted men with rifles, then back at Marcus. “Though I think perhaps you have not come to buy flour.”

“Marcus Kane.”

“I know who you are, Mr. Kane.” There was no fear in the old man’s voice. Only a kind of sadness. “We have heard about Harlan’s Crossing.”

“Then you know why I’m here.”

“I know what you did there. I do not yet know why you are here.” Brenneman leaned lightly on his stick. “Perhaps you will tell me.”

Marcus reached into the inside pocket of his coat and drew out a folded sheet of paper. It had been printed on the old laser printer in the Iron Ridge city building, powered by a generator for exactly eight minutes. He had written it himself, over three nights, choosing every word.

He did not hand it to the bishop. He read it aloud, so that the four younger men and the faces in the farmhouse windows could hear.

“*Proclamation of the Iron Ridge Regional Security Authority. In the absence of any lawful federal, state, or county government, and in order to preserve life, property, and public order, the Iron Ridge Regional Security Authority hereby assumes jurisdiction over all townships, villages, and unincorporated communities within the former boundaries of Hollister, Crawford, and Ashwood counties.*”

He heard one of the younger men draw a sharp breath at the word *Ashwood.*

“*All communities within this jurisdiction shall register their residents, livestock, stores of food, fuel, and medicine with the Authority no later than December 1. All communities shall contribute thirty percent of their agricultural production to the common defense. All firearms beyond those necessary for hunting shall be surrendered. All men between the ages of eighteen and forty-five shall be subject to service in the Regional Defense Force. In return, the Authority guarantees the protection of every registered community against raiders, bandits, and hostile alliances, and the fair distribution of food and medicine in times of shortage. Communities that refuse registration shall be considered hostile to the public order.*”

He folded the paper.

“*Signed, Marcus J. Kane, Colonel, Commanding.*”

For a long moment, the only sound in the valley was the slow creak of the waterwheel turning in the creek.

Then Jacob Brenneman said, “You are not a colonel, Mr. Kane.”

Marcus’s eyes narrowed. “I beg your pardon?”

“I read the newspapers once, before the lights went out. The *Mansfield News Journal*. I remember a story about you. You were a captain in the National Guard. You retired six years ago.” The old man’s voice was mild. “You have promoted yourself.”

Behind Marcus, Dutch Kessler shifted in his saddle. His hand drifted toward his rifle.

Marcus raised one finger without looking back, and Kessler stopped.

“The government that gave me my rank no longer exists,” Marcus said evenly. “So I suppose I’m free to choose my own. Just as I’m free to choose who deserves my protection.” He tapped the folded paper against his palm. “I’ll be honest with you, Bishop. I have no quarrel with your people. You don’t fight. You don’t steal. You don’t cause trouble. You grow more food per acre than anyone in this county, and you do it without a gallon of diesel. I *need* people like you.” He paused. “I’m not asking you to take up arms. I’m asking you to register, and to pay your share. That’s all.”

“And our young men?”

“Will serve.”

“Our young men do not bear arms, Mr. Kane. We have not borne arms for five hundred years. Our fathers went to prison in the World Wars rather than bear arms.” The bishop’s voice did not rise. “We will not bear them for you.”

“Then they’ll serve in other ways. Labor battalions. Farm crews. They’ll dig trenches and haul supplies and build walls.” Marcus shrugged. “But they will serve.”

The old man considered this.

“We will pay your thirty percent,” he said at last. “We have always paid the taxes of whoever governs the land. ‘*Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s.*’” He looked up at Marcus steadily. “But we will not register our names in your book. And we will not swear your oath.”

“Why not?”

“Because our Lord said, ‘*Swear not at all… But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay.*’ We swear no oaths to any man. Not to kings. Not to presidents.” A faint, gentle smile touched his lips. “And not to self-appointed colonels.”

Somewhere behind Marcus, one of the men from the Mansfield jail laughed out loud, then quickly stifled it.

Marcus did not laugh. He looked down at the old man for a long time.

He could end this in thirty seconds. He knew exactly how. Kessler knew exactly how. Burn the meetinghouse. Take the horses. March every young man in the valley back to Iron Ridge in chains, and let the rest of them bury their bishop behind the mill. The towns within fifty miles would hear about it by nightfall, and the next village would sign his proclamation without reading it.

But dead Mennonites couldn’t plow.

And a burned mill couldn’t grind grain.

“Keep your oath, Bishop,” he said at last. “I don’t need your words. I need your wheat.” He handed the folded proclamation to one of the young men behind Brenneman, who took it as though it were a snake. “My quartermaster will come by next week to count your stores. You’ll deliver thirty percent to the Grange hall on County Road 7 by the first of every month. Your young men will report for labor duty every Monday. If any of it doesn’t happen, I’ll come back.” He paused. “And next time, I won’t bring a proclamation.”

He turned to mount his horse.

“Mr. Kane.”

Marcus stopped.

Jacob Brenneman had not moved. He stood in the gravel lane with both hands folded on top of his walking stick, looking up at Marcus with those calm, pale blue eyes.

“I will pray for you,” the old man said.

Marcus laughed. It came out harsher than he intended. “Save your prayers for yourself, old man. You’ll need them more than I will.”

“Perhaps.” The bishop’s voice was very gentle. “But I think you are carrying a great weight, Mr. Kane. I can see it in your face. I have seen that look before, on men who have lost something they cannot get back.” He paused. “‘*For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?*’”

For just an instant, something flickered behind Marcus’s eyes.

Then it was gone.

He swung up into the saddle, wheeled his horse around, and rode back across the creek bridge without looking back. Forty mounted men and two pickup trucks followed him, and the valley of Pike’s Mill fell silent again except for the slow, patient turning of the waterwheel.

At the top of the hill, where County Road 7 crossed the old county line, Marcus reined in.

A green metal road sign stood there on a rusted post, pocked with birdshot from twenty years of bored teenagers with shotguns:

ENTERING ASHWOOD COUNTY

Marcus looked at it for a long moment. Then he turned in his saddle.

“Dutch. Hammer and nails.”

Kessler rode forward and handed them over. Marcus dismounted, took a second copy of the proclamation from his coat, and nailed it squarely over the words *ASHWOOD COUNTY*, one nail in each corner, driving each one home with a single hard blow.

The paper fluttered in the cold wind.

“Let them find it,” he said.

He climbed back into the saddle. As the column moved off, Marcus found himself glancing, just once, toward the back of the line, where a boy of fourteen rode a gray mare beside Sergeant Hendricks. The boy had been watching the whole conversation with the bishop. He had not taken his eyes off the old man once.

Tyler.

Marcus looked away.

* * *

South Gate, Ashwood, Ohio

November 4 — 4:15 p.m.

Colby Rourke came into Ashwood for the second time the same way he had come the first — hidden in plain sight among the desperate.

There were twenty-two of them this time, a straggling column of refugees from Galion and Bucyrus who had been walking for nine days. Rourke had fallen in with them on Route 30 two days earlier, wearing a torn Carhartt jacket and filthy jeans and a week of beard, carrying nothing but a backpack with a sleeping bag, two cans of beans, and a battered paperback Louis L'Amour novel. He had told them his name was Cole Rogers and that his wife and son had died of cholera in a camp outside Marion. He had told the story so many times, in so many towns, that he half believed it himself.

The truth was simpler. Colby Rourke had never been married. He had been a licensed surveyor for Hollister County for sixteen years, and he had a gift for remembering exactly how far one thing was from another. In April he had also had a gambling debt of forty-one thousand dollars and a bookie in Mansfield who had started making phone calls to his mother.

Marcus Kane had made the debt disappear. Marcus Kane had made the bookie disappear, too.

Rourke did not ask how.

The refugee column shuffled up to the south gate — two school buses parked nose-to-nose across Route 13, with a narrow gap between them guarded by sandbags and men with rifles. A plywood watchtower rose above the buses, and Rourke's eyes went to it automatically, the way they went to everything. *Twelve feet high. Two men. One scoped deer rifle, one AR-pattern carbine. Field radio. No searchlight.*

He had noted all of this three weeks ago. Now he noted what had changed.

There was a second tower now, fifty yards east, on the roof of the old Dairy Queen. Sandbags had been added to the base of the first. The gap between the buses had been narrowed, and a steel cattle gate had been hung across it on heavy hinges. And there were more men. Twice as many.

They're getting ready, he thought. *Someone told them we're coming.*

"Line up! Single file! Hands where we can see them!"

The voice belonged to a lean, dark-haired man with a quiet, steady manner and a rifle held at low ready. Rourke recognized him from his last visit — Ortega, the volunteers had called him. A former cook. Rourke had also heard the volunteers say he could put five rounds in a coffee can at three hundred yards.

He kept his eyes down.

The refugees were searched one by one — bags opened, coats patted down. A young volunteer with a clipboard wrote down names, hometowns, ages, and any sign of illness. A second volunteer — a woman in a surgical mask made from a T-shirt — looked in every mouth and felt every forehead. Two people with coughs were pulled out of line and sent to a separate tent.

Rourke passed without trouble. *Cole Rogers, 44, Marion.* He had never had a cold in his life.

Inside the gate, the refugees were led down a gravel lane toward the fairgrounds, where the camp sprawled across the old livestock barns and midway lots — a sea of tents, campers, tarps, and plywood shacks. Smoke rose from a hundred cook fires. Children ran barefoot in the cold mud. Somewhere a baby was crying, and somewhere else someone was singing a hymn.

Rourke settled his backpack in the corner of a drafty cattle barn with thirty other people and waited for dark.

* * *

He went out an hour after sunset.

The camp had a curfew, but it was loosely enforced, and nobody paid much attention to a tired man walking toward the latrines. From the latrines he slipped along the fence line behind the grandstand, through a gap in the chain link he had found three weeks ago, and into the dark streets of Ashwood.

He moved slowly and carefully, the way he had moved through forests and fields for sixteen years with a transit and a measuring chain. Not sneaking. Sneaking drew attention. He walked like a man who belonged, hands in his pockets, head down against the cold.

And he counted.

Checkpoint at Maple and Fourth — new since last visit. Two men, sandbags, no vehicle.

Grain elevator — guard post on the loading dock. Three men. They've strung barbed wire along the rail spur.

Water treatment plant — fence reinforced. One guard, asleep in a lawn chair.

Courthouse — light on the second floor. Command center. Lookout on the roof. Four trucks parked on the square, two with fuel cans in the bed.

High school — clinic. Generator running behind the gym. Heavy foot traffic. Two guards on the doors.

He made notes in his head, not on paper. Paper could be found. His memory could not.

At the corner of Church Street and Elm, he stopped.

First Baptist Church stood on the corner, its white steeple pale against the stars, every window glowing with lantern light. The doors were open despite the cold, and music poured out into the street — not a choir, not an organ, just hundreds of ordinary voices singing together, rough and unpolished and utterly sincere.

"*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like me…*"

Rourke stood on the sidewalk across the street and listened.

He had not been inside a church since his grandmother's funeral when he was twelve. He did not believe in God. He did not believe in much of anything anymore, except that the strong survived and the weak did not, and that Marcus Kane was the strongest man he had ever met.

But something about the singing made his chest hurt.

He had come here three weeks ago, sat in the back pew of this church for two nights, and eaten their soup. It had been the best meal he'd had in a month. Nobody had asked him who he was. Nobody had asked him to prove he deserved it. A young woman with a worn black Bible had handed him the bowl herself and said, *God bless you. We're glad you're here.*

He had written that down in his report to Kessler as a joke. *Security at churches nonexistent. Will feed anyone who walks in.*

Kessler had laughed.

Rourke had not.

"You coming in?"

He turned sharply. A tall, lanky young man was standing a few feet behind him on the sidewalk, arms full of split firewood. Eighteen, maybe. Thin face. Serious eyes. He wore a thrift-store coat two sizes too big and a knit cap pulled low over his ears.

"There's room," the boy said. "There's always room. And there's soup after." He nodded toward the church. "Potato tonight. Mrs. Voss brought butter."

"I was just passing by," Rourke said.

"Sure." The boy shifted the firewood in his arms. "Me too, the first time. I stood right about where you're standing for three nights before I went in." He smiled faintly. "My parents were in there every Sunday for my whole life. I never went. Not once. Told them it was all a fairy tale." He looked at the church. "Then one afternoon they were just… gone. Both of them. And I was the one left behind."

Rourke said nothing.

"I'm Noah," the boy said. "Noah Simmons."

"Cole."

"Well, Cole." Noah stepped past him toward the church doors. "You don't have to come in. But I'll save you a bowl of soup, just in case." He paused on the top step and looked back. "And hey —

whatever you lost, whoever you lost — there's somebody in there who knows what that's like. That's all. That's all I wanted to say."

He went inside.

Rourke stood on the sidewalk for a long time, listening to the singing.

"*I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind, but now I see.*"

Then he turned and walked away into the dark, toward the east edge of town.

He had one more stop to make.

* * *

The fencepost stood alone at the corner of an abandoned cornfield on Township Road 14, a half mile east of the last Ashwood checkpoint. It was an old white oak post, gray with age, part of a fence line that had rotted away decades ago. Nobody paid any attention to it.

Near the base, on the north side, a knot had fallen out of the wood long ago, leaving a hollow the size of a man's fist.

Rourke knelt beside the post in the darkness, reached into the hollow, and felt his fingers close around a small glass pickle jar.

He had left the jar there three weeks ago, empty, with a single slip of paper inside. The note on the paper had been Kessler's idea — three typed lines, no signature:

Ashwood cannot win. The Colonel rewards those who help him. If you want to protect your family, leave word here.

Rourke had not really expected anything to come of it. It was a fishing line cast into dark water. Most towns had one or two people willing to sell out their neighbors for a full stomach and a guarantee of safety, but finding them usually took months.

He unscrewed the lid.

His own note was gone.

In its place was a folded sheet of lined yellow paper, the kind that came from a legal pad. Rourke unfolded it and read it by the faint starlight, squinting.

The handwriting was neat, careful, and deliberately disguised — block capitals, printed slowly with a pencil.

ASHWOOD FIGHTERS: 262 ACTIVE. 40 RESERVE (OLD MEN/BOYS). AMMUNITION LOW. MOST RIFLES HAVE LESS THAN 60 ROUNDS EACH. FOOD LASTS TO END OF FEBRUARY. INFLUENZA IN CAMP. REYNOLDS KNOWS ABOUT ARTILLERY. WALKER AND BROOKS DO NOT AGREE ON WHAT TO DO. THERE ARE PEOPLE HERE WHO WANT TO TALK TO THE COLONEL. I WILL LEAVE MORE.

There was no signature.

Rourke read it three times. Then he folded it carefully, slipped it into the lining of his jacket, put the empty jar back in the hollow, and stood up.

Reynolds knows about artillery.

That meant somebody had seen the guns. And that meant somebody inside Ashwood had been close enough to hear when they talked about it.

Rourke looked back toward the town — the glow of lanterns in the church windows, the faint, distant music still carrying on the cold air.

For one strange moment, he thought about the boy on the sidewalk. *I'll save you a bowl of soup, just in case.*

Then he turned his collar up against the wind and started walking southwest, toward the county line and Iron Ridge, twenty-six miles away.

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

He did not know that verse. But it followed him all the same.

* * *

The Courthouse Command Center, Ashwood

November 5 — 7:10 a.m.

Luis Ortega laid the proclamation on the walnut table in front of Ethan Walker without a word.

It was damp and wrinkled, with four ragged holes torn in its corners where the nails had been. Ortega's patrol had found it an hour after dawn, fluttering on the county line sign on County Road 7, just above the valley of Pike's Mill. He had ridden hard to bring it in.

Ethan read it once in silence. Then he read it aloud, so that the others could hear — Jack, Mercer, Mayor Brooks, Rebecca, and Hal Whitaker, all gathered around the table in the gray morning light.

"*…hereby assumes jurisdiction over all townships, villages, and unincorporated communities within the former boundaries of Hollister, Crawford, and Ashwood counties.*"

He read the rest. The registration. The thirty percent. The surrender of weapons. The conscription of every man between eighteen and forty-five.

Communities that refuse registration shall be considered hostile to the public order.

He set it down.

For a while, nobody said anything.

"Thirty percent," Hal Whitaker said finally, very quietly. "Thirty percent of *everything.* We can barely make it to March on a hundred percent."

"He knows that," Mercer said. "That's the point. He doesn't expect you to pay it. He expects you to *refuse.*" He tapped the paper. "This isn't an offer. It's a legal document. He's building a justification. When he comes for Ashwood — and he will — he won't be a raider anymore. He'll be the lawful

authority enforcing order against a hostile community." He shook his head grimly. "Every tyrant in history has understood that. Nobody wants to follow a bandit. People will follow a government."

"He's not a government," Rebecca said.

"He is now," Mercer said. "Because nobody else is."

Mayor Brooks had taken off his glasses and was rubbing the bridge of his nose. He looked, Ethan thought, older than he had ever looked.

"What about Pike's Mill?" Brooks asked. "What happened there?"

"We don't know yet," Ortega said. "I sent a rider down this morning. The proclamation was nailed right above their valley. Kane must have gone through there first."

"Those people are Mennonites," Hal said. "They won't fight. Kane could take that whole valley in an afternoon."

"If he wanted it destroyed," Mercer said. "I don't think he does. I think he wants it working. For him."

Jack Reynolds had not said a word since Ortega arrived. He stood at the big county map on the east wall with his arms folded, looking at a single spot. After a while, he reached out and touched it with one finger.

"The Grange hall," he said. "County Road 7."

Everyone turned.

"It's on high ground. Clear fields of fire in every direction. Paved road access from the south. And it's about six miles from this courthouse." Jack turned around. His face was very calm, but Ethan had known him long enough to recognize what that calm meant. "That's where I'd put the guns, if I were him. And Kane just nailed his flag to a post a quarter mile from it."

Mayor Brooks went pale. "Guns?"

Jack looked at Ethan.

Ethan looked at Mercer.

Mercer sighed. "I suppose it's time."

And he told the mayor about the howitzers.

* * *

When the meeting broke up an hour later, Ethan found Rebecca standing alone at the tall window at the end of the second-floor hallway, looking out over the courthouse square. The Wall of the Missing was just visible below, the photographs fluttering in the wind.

He stopped beside her.

"You told Daniel the truth," she said without turning. "About the artillery."

"Mercer did."

“How did he take it?”

“About how you’d expect.” Ethan leaned against the window frame. “He wants to call another town meeting. Tell everybody. He says people have a right to know.”

“And you don’t think so.”

“I think people have a right to know. I also think if nine thousand people find out there’s a pair of cannons six miles away that can hit any house in town, half of them are going to panic and the other half are going to start listening to Russ Keller.” He rubbed his face. “Mercer says to be careful who hears it. He says fear travels fast. And so does information.”

Rebecca turned and looked at him.

“You think someone’s talking to Kane,” she said.

He hesitated. Then he nodded.

“I don’t know who. I don’t have any proof. Just — things that don’t add up. A rider from Millbrook who came in September and never got to me. Kane’s scouts always seem to know exactly where to look.” He shook his head. “Maybe I’m just tired. Maybe I’m seeing ghosts.”

“Maybe.” Rebecca looked back out the window. “Or maybe you’re seeing clearly for the first time.” She was quiet for a moment. “Do you remember the story of Nehemiah, rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem?”

“Vaguely.”

“He came back from exile and found the city in ruins. Walls broken down, gates burned. And he started rebuilding. And all the enemies around Jerusalem — Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem — they mocked him, and threatened him, and plotted to attack while the walls were still going up.” She smiled faintly. “Dad preached a whole series on it when I was in high school. I slept through most of it. But I remember one verse, because he made us memorize it for Sunday school.”

“Which one?”

“‘*They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon.*’” She turned to him. “They built with one hand and held a sword with the other. That’s what we have to do now, Ethan. We keep building. We keep feeding people and caring for the sick and loving our neighbors. And we keep our swords ready.” She paused. “And we pray. Nehemiah prayed before he did anything. ‘*Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God, and set a watch against them day and night.*’”

“Prayer and a watch.”

“Prayer and a watch.”

Ethan looked down at the Wall of the Missing, at the thousands of faces fluttering in the cold November wind.

“Then I guess we’d better set a watch,” he said.

* * *

Iron Ridge

November 5 — 10:40 p.m.

The house Marcus Kane lived in had once belonged to the general manager of the Hollister Steel Works — a big brick Georgian on the hill above the mill, with white columns and a slate roof and a view of the whole valley. Marcus had not chosen it for its size. He had chosen it because from the upstairs windows, he could see every wall and every tower of Iron Ridge at once.

He sat now in the study on the second floor, with a single oil lamp burning on the desk and Colby Rourke's hand-drawn map of Ashwood spread out before him. Beside it lay the folded yellow sheet from the legal pad.

There are people here who want to talk to the Colonel.

He had read it a dozen times.

There was a soft knock at the door.

"Come."

It was not Kessler. It was Tyler.

His son stood in the doorway in flannel pajama pants and an old Cleveland Browns sweatshirt that had once belonged to Marcus. He was fourteen, gangly and sharp-featured, with his mother's dark eyes and her habit of tilting his head slightly when he was about to ask a question he knew his father wouldn't like.

"Can't sleep?" Marcus asked.

"No, sir."

"Come in."

Tyler came in and sat on the leather couch by the cold fireplace, pulling his knees up to his chest. For a while he said nothing. Marcus went back to the map. He had learned that Tyler talked when Tyler was ready, and not before.

"Dad," Tyler said at last. "That old man. At the Mennonite place."

Marcus kept his eyes on the map. "What about him?"

"He said he'd pray for you."

"People say a lot of things."

"He meant it, though. I could tell." Tyler picked at a loose thread on the couch cushion. "He wasn't scared of you. Everybody's scared of you. Even Sergeant Kessler's scared of you sometimes. But that old man wasn't." He paused. "Why wasn't he scared?"

Marcus set down his pencil.

He looked at his son for a long moment across the lamplit room. And he saw, the way he saw every time he looked at the boy, the face of the woman he had lost.

Diane had been a Christian. Not a loud one. She never preached at him, never left tracts on his pillow, never dragged him to revival meetings. She simply went to church every Sunday morning with Tyler, and prayed at every meal, and read her Bible at the kitchen table at six a.m. with a cup of coffee before anyone else was awake. When he came home from Afghanistan the second time, angry and broken and drinking too much, she had not left him, though he had given her every reason. She had stayed. She had prayed. She had told him, over and over, in a hundred different ways, *God isn't finished with you yet, Marcus.*

At 3:17 on a spring afternoon, she had been standing in the kitchen of their house on Birch Street, making a tuna casserole.

He had come home at six and found her apron lying on the floor.

Tyler had been at school. Tyler had not vanished. Neither had Marcus.

That was when he understood. God had taken the one good thing in his life and left him behind with the boy, because God had judged them both and found them wanting. Every sermon Diane had ever quoted, every verse she had ever whispered over him in the dark, had been true. And the God she loved had looked at Marcus Kane and said, *Not you.*

Fine.

If God did not want him, then Marcus did not need God.

He would build his own kingdom. He would protect his own son. He would make sure that no one — not raiders, not warlords, not starving neighbors, not God Himself — ever took anything from him again.

"He wasn't scared," Marcus said slowly, "because he believes in something that isn't real, Tyler. That's all. When you believe in fairy tales, you don't have to be afraid of anything. It's a kind of drug."

Tyler looked down at his knees.

"Mom wasn't scared either," he said quietly. "Of anything."

The room was very still.

"Your mother," Marcus said, and his voice was carefully controlled, "was the best person I ever knew. And she was wrong."

"She wasn't wrong, though." Tyler's voice was barely above a whisper. "She said Jesus was going to come and take the Christians to heaven. She said it'd happen all at once, in a second, and the people left behind would have to decide." He looked up at his father, and his dark eyes were wet. "And then it happened, Dad. Exactly like she said. How can she have been wrong?"

Marcus stood up so abruptly that the chair scraped against the hardwood floor.

"Go to bed, Tyler."

“Dad —”

“*Go to bed.*”

The boy flinched. Then he unfolded himself from the couch and walked to the door without another word. At the threshold, he stopped, and without turning around, he said:

“I still have her Bible. It’s under my mattress. I read it sometimes.” A pause. “I’m not going to stop.”

He closed the door softly behind him.

Marcus stood in the middle of the lamplit study for a long time. His hands were shaking. He clenched them into fists until they stopped.

‘*For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?*’

The old man’s voice. Diane’s voice. They sounded exactly alike.

He went to the window and looked out over Iron Ridge — the walls, the towers, the barracks, the dark silhouettes of the howitzers on the old slag yard at the south end of the compound. Twelve hundred people, sleeping safe because of him. Eight towns under his protection. A proclamation nailed to the last county line.

Everything he had built. Everything he had taken.

It was not enough. It would never be enough.

But it would have to do.

There was another knock at the door. Kessler, this time.

“Colonel. Sorry to disturb you. Rourke wants to know if you’ve made a decision about the note.”

Marcus turned from the window. His face was composed again, cold and still, the face of the man who had walked the ranks that morning and ridden into Pike’s Mill at the head of forty guns.

He crossed to the desk and picked up the folded yellow sheet.

Walker and Brooks do not agree on what to do.

There are people here who want to talk to the Colonel.

“Tell Rourke to go back to Ashwood in a week,” he said. “Tell him to leave an answer in the jar.” He handed the paper to Kessler. “Tell our friend that the Colonel is listening. Tell him that when Ashwood falls — and it will fall — the people who helped will be remembered. Their families will be safe. Their homes will be spared. They’ll sit at my table.”

“And what do we want from him, sir?”

Marcus looked down at Rourke’s map of Ashwood. At the courthouse, circled twice. At the grain elevator, the water plant, the high school clinic. At the small penciled crosses scattered across the town, marking the churches.

“Everything,” he said. “Every checkpoint. Every patrol schedule. Every weakness. Where they keep their ammunition. Where they keep their medicine. Who Walker trusts, and who he doesn’t.” He paused. “And I want to know the moment they decide to refuse my proclamation.”

“You think they’ll refuse?”

Marcus almost smiled.

“Walker’s a believer now, Dutch. A man like that doesn’t bow.” He picked up the pencil and drew a single, small, careful circle around the old Grange hall on County Road 7, six miles from the Ashwood courthouse. “So I’ll have to break him instead.”

Kessler saluted and went out.

Marcus sat back down at the desk, alone in the lamplight. Somewhere down the hall, very faintly, he could hear the soft murmur of his son’s voice.

Tyler was praying.

Marcus Kane listened for a long, long time.

Then he turned down the lamp and sat in the dark.

“*There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.*”

— Proverbs 16:25

* * *

END OF CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER 4

The Price of Survival

“*Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help; and stay on horses, and trust in chariots, because they are many… but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the LORD!*”

— Isaiah 31:1

* * *

North Checkpoint, State Route 39

November 7 — 10:00 a.m.

They came under a white flag.

It was a bedsheet tied to a broom handle, flapping from the passenger window of a mud-splattered Ford Bronco, and it was the first white flag Ashwood had seen in six months. The volunteers at the north checkpoint didn’t quite know what to do with it. They pointed their rifles at it anyway.

The Bronco stopped at the barricade. Two men got out.

The first was Carl Haskins, huge and weary in his Carhartt coat and blaze-orange cap, his hands raised and empty. The second was a tall, gaunt man with a hawk nose, hollow cheeks, and a Carverton Volunteer Fire Department patch on the shoulder of his jacket. He did not raise his hands. He stood beside the Bronco with his arms folded and looked at the Ashwood rifles as though they were a personal insult.

Ethan recognized him from the fuel plant. The man who had stood over Danny Haskins's bleeding body and said, *You shot him. You think we're going to hand him over to you?*

Ray Talbot.

"We're here on behalf of the Council of the Tri-County Compact," Talbot said, loudly enough for every volunteer at the checkpoint to hear. "We have terms to present to the government of Ashwood." He looked at Ethan with flat, colorless eyes. "Assuming Ashwood still has one."

* * *

They met in the commissioners' chamber on the second floor of the courthouse, around the long walnut table beneath the big county map with its rash of red pins. Mayor Brooks sat at the head. Ethan sat at his right hand, Jack at his left. Hal Whitaker, Sarah Collins, Russ Keller, and the four other members of the Ashwood Town Council filled the remaining chairs. Daniel Mercer stood in the back corner, arms folded, saying nothing and watching everything.

Carl and Ray Talbot sat alone on the far side of the table.

Talbot did the talking. He had a folder of papers — typed, Ethan noticed, on a real typewriter — and he laid them out in front of him with the care of a man who had rehearsed this moment many times.

"I'll be direct," Talbot said. "The Council of the Compact represents five communities and eleven thousand people. We have four hundred and twelve fighters under arms. We have a unified command, a common treasury, and a central supply depot in Millbrook." He tapped the folder. "Six days ago, Marcus Kane nailed a proclamation to the county line claiming authority over all three counties. Including ours. Including yours. You've seen it."

"We've seen it," Brooks said quietly.

"Then you know what it means. Kane isn't going to stop at Pike's Mill. He isn't going to stop at Ashwood. He wants everything from Mansfield to the lake." Talbot's pale eyes moved around the table. "Separately, none of us can stop him. Together, we might. Six hundred and seventy fighters. Twenty thousand people. Two towns with walls and one with a doctor."

He slid the top page across the table toward Mayor Brooks.

"The Council invites the town of Ashwood to join the Tri-County Compact as its sixth member community. These are the terms."

Brooks adjusted his glasses and began to read aloud. His voice was steady at first.

“*One. Ashwood’s defense force shall be placed under the unified command of the Compact’s military council, with Ashwood retaining one seat on that council.*”

Jack’s jaw tightened, but he said nothing.

“*Two. All grain, livestock, fuel, and medical supplies within Ashwood shall be registered with the Compact supply depot and distributed according to need across all member communities.*”

Hal Whitaker made a low sound in his throat.

“*Three. Ashwood’s medical clinic shall serve all member communities equally, with its physician rotating among them on a schedule determined by the Council.*”

Sarah went very still.

“*Four. In light of severe shortages, member communities shall accept no further refugees from outside the Compact’s boundaries, and shall relocate existing non-resident refugees to designated camps beyond the Compact’s borders by January 1.*”

The room was silent.

“Relocate,” Sarah said slowly. “You mean *expel.* You mean take fourteen hundred people — women, children, sick people with influenza — and march them out into the snow.”

“I mean what it says, Doctor,” Talbot replied. “We can’t feed them. You can’t feed them. Nobody can. Every mouth we feed from outside is a mouth we take from our own children.”

“And where do they go?”

“That’s not the Compact’s concern.”

Sarah stared at him. Then she looked at Carl Haskins. Carl would not meet her eyes.

Brooks kept reading. His voice had grown quieter.

“*Five. The Compact has opened communication with the International Relief Coordination Office through its regional liaison in Columbus. The Office has indicated that relief convoys carrying food, fuel, and medicine will reach central Ohio in the spring. Priority distribution will be given to organized regional authorities that have completed a full census of their residents in accordance with the Office’s registration protocols. All member communities shall therefore complete a registration of every resident — name, age, address, occupation, health status, and skills — on forms provided by the Office, no later than February 1.*”

He set the page down.

“That’s it?” he asked.

“That’s it,” Talbot said.

In the back corner of the room, Ethan saw Daniel Mercer’s head come up slowly. Mercer was looking at the page on the table. Not at Talbot. At the page.

“Where,” Mercer said quietly, “did you get the forms?”

Talbot turned. “I’m sorry — who are you?”

“Friend of the town. Where did you get the registration forms?”

Talbot hesitated for just a moment. “A liaison came through Millbrook last month. A man from Columbus. Very professional. He had a letter of introduction from the Office, a satellite phone, and a box of printed forms. He met with the Council. He explained that the international community wants to help, but they can’t help chaos. They need to know who’s where, and what they need.” He shrugged. “It seemed reasonable.”

“I’ll bet it did,” Mercer said.

Talbot’s eyes narrowed. “Is there a problem?”

Mercer didn’t answer. He looked at Ethan across the room, and Ethan read the look perfectly.

Rachel. Get Rachel.

* * *

Rachel Monroe had been living in a spare bedroom in Samuel Graves’s farmhouse for a week. Sarah had treated her for exposure and early pneumonia, and she had spent most of the week sleeping, eating Samuel’s terrible venison stew, and reading. She had not been reading her documents. Samuel had caught her, on the fourth morning, sitting at his kitchen table with his dead wife’s Bible open to the Gospel of Mark.

Research, she had said defensively.

Of course, Samuel had replied, and poured her a cup of chicory without another word.

Now she sat in the commissioners’ chamber with one of the Compact’s registration forms in her hand, and her face had gone the color of skim milk.

The form was two pages long, printed on good white paper. At the top was a heading: **REGIONAL RESIDENT REGISTRATION — INTERNATIONAL RELIEF COORDINATION OFFICE.** Below that were neat boxes for name, date of birth, address, household members, occupation, medical conditions, special skills. Near the bottom was a box labeled **RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION (OPTIONAL).**

And at the very bottom, in small gray type, was a line of text Ethan had not noticed:

Form RR-4. Issued under Framework Protocol 7, Appendix F.

Rachel opened her satchel with fingers that were not quite steady. She peeled back the plastic, leafed through the eighty-seven pages, and pulled out a single sheet. She laid it on the table beside the form.

It was a page from the Framework. At the top, it read: **APPENDIX F — REGIONAL REGISTRATION PROTOCOLS.**

Below it was a sample form.

It was identical. Every box. Every heading. Every word. Even the box at the bottom: **RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION (OPTIONAL).**

“Eleven weeks before the disappearances,” Rachel said softly. “They had the forms printed eleven weeks before.”

Nobody said anything.

Ray Talbot looked from the Framework page to the registration form and back again. For the first time since he had walked into the room, something like uncertainty crossed his gaunt face. Then it hardened into contempt.

“So somebody planned ahead,” he said. “Good for them. At least *somebody* did.”

“Mr. Talbot,” Rachel said, “the people who wrote this document knew what was going to happen to the United States before it happened. They planned for the government to collapse. They planned for the towns to fight each other. And now they’re sending men with satellite phones and boxes of forms to collect the name, address, and religion of every surviving person in Ohio.” She looked up at him. “Doesn’t that frighten you even a little?”

“What frightens me,” Talbot said, “is burying children because we don’t have medicine.” He stood up and gathered his papers. “You people can sit here and read tea leaves all day. The Council needs an answer by November twentieth. After that, the offer is withdrawn.” He looked at Brooks. “And then, Mayor, you’ll be on your own. Between us and Kane.”

He walked out.

Carl Haskins stayed in his seat for a moment longer. He looked at Ethan across the table.

“How’s Danny?” he asked quietly.

“Sarah says he’s doing well,” Ethan said. “No infection. He was asking about you this morning.”

Carl nodded. His big hands were clasped on the table in front of him, knuckles white.

“Take the deal, Ethan,” he said, very low, so that only the people nearest him could hear. “I know what you’re thinking. I know what that form looks like. Maybe she’s right. Maybe it’s all some big conspiracy.” He shook his head. “But Ray Talbot’s got the Council behind him, and if Ashwood says no, he’s going to come for your grain in January whether Kane does or not. And then Kane’s going to walk in and pick up whatever’s left of both of us.” He stood up. “You and me, we’re on the same side of this. We always were. Don’t make me fight you.”

He followed Talbot out.

The door closed.

For a long time, nobody in the commissioners’ chamber spoke.

* * *

The Brooks Residence, Maple Avenue

November 7 — 9:45 p.m.

Daniel Brooks lived in a tall yellow Victorian on Maple Avenue with a wraparound porch and a turret, the kind of house that appeared on Christmas cards. His wife, Ellen, had inherited it from her grandmother. They had raised three children in it, all grown now and scattered — one in Chicago, one in Atlanta, one in Denver. All three cities had been hit in the first thirty minutes.

Daniel and Ellen had not heard a word from any of them since.

Ethan sat at their kitchen table with a cup of chicory in front of him and a kerosene lamp hissing overhead, and waited while Ellen Brooks gave herself an injection.

She did it with quick, practiced hands, the way she had done it four times a day for thirty-one years. Type 1 diabetes, diagnosed at twenty-two. She was fifty-three now — small, silver-haired, sharp-witted, and kind, a retired high school chemistry teacher who had taught half the adults in Ashwood the periodic table. She capped the syringe, dropped it into a coffee can on the counter, and sat down across from Ethan with a smile.

“Don’t look so grim, Ethan. It’s just a shot.”

“Sorry, Mrs. Brooks.”

“Ellen. You’re thirty-five years old and you’re a war commander. I think you can call me Ellen.” She glanced at her husband, who was standing at the window with his back to them. “Well. Are the two of you going to talk about it, or are you going to stand around like a couple of fence posts?”

Daniel turned from the window. His face in the lamplight looked older than Ethan had ever seen it.

“I’m going to recommend that we accept the Compact’s terms,” he said.

Ethan had known it was coming. He had seen it in the mayor’s face in the commissioners’ chamber that afternoon. It still landed like a blow.

“Daniel —”

“Let me finish.” Brooks sat down heavily at the head of the table. “I’ve been doing arithmetic all day, Ethan. The same arithmetic Hal’s been doing for weeks. We run out of food in February. The camp runs out sooner. We’ve got two hundred and sixty-two fighters with less than sixty rounds apiece. Kane’s got two hundred and eighty professionals and a pair of howitzers that can hit this kitchen from six miles away.” He rubbed his eyes behind his glasses. “Alone, we can’t win. You know that. Jack knows it. Mercer knows it. The Compact gives us four hundred more men. It gives us a chance.”

“It gives Ray Talbot command of our defense force.”

“One seat on the council. Jack gets a voice.”

“One voice out of six. And the Compact makes us throw fourteen hundred people out into the snow.”

“I *know* that.” Brooks’s voice cracked. “Do you think I don’t know that? Do you think I haven’t been sitting here all night thinking about that? About those babies in the camp, and Dale Hollis and his little girl, and that young mother from Marion that Gary Voss gave the butter to?” He pressed his hands flat

on the table. “I’m going to fight that term. I’m going to fight it with everything I’ve got. Maybe we can get the Council to accept the refugees who are already here. Maybe we can get them to take a few hundred into Millbrook. Maybe —”

“And if they won’t?”

Brooks didn’t answer.

“And the registration,” Ethan said quietly. “Rachel’s forms. You saw it, Daniel. You saw the date.”

“I saw a piece of paper that a frightened reporter carried out of a burning city.” Brooks shook his head slowly. “Maybe it means what she thinks. Maybe it means something else. Maybe the people who wrote it were just smarter than everybody else and saw the collapse coming. Governments do contingency planning all the time. The Pentagon used to have a plan for a zombie invasion, for heaven’s sake.” He looked at Ethan. “But I know what the relief convoys mean. Food. Fuel. *Medicine*.”

His eyes went, just for a moment, to the small refrigerator in the corner of the kitchen. It was unplugged, its door propped open, empty. Ellen’s insulin was kept in the spring house behind the Methodist church now, with the rest of the town’s supply. Fourteen vials, for every diabetic in Ashwood.

Ethan followed his gaze. And understood.

“How long?” he asked quietly.

Ellen answered for her husband. Her voice was perfectly calm.

“Sarah’s been rationing it. Cutting doses where she can. There are nine of us in town who are insulin-dependent. At the rate we’re going, the last vial runs out sometime in the middle of January.” She smiled faintly. “I’ve done the math too, Ethan. I was a chemistry teacher.”

“Ellen —” Daniel began.

“No, Danny. He should know.” She reached across the table and laid her small, cool hand over Ethan’s. “Without insulin, a Type 1 diabetic lasts a few weeks. Maybe a month if she’s careful. It isn’t a pleasant way to go.” She said it the way she might have explained a chemical reaction to a class of sophomores. “The relief convoys are supposed to come in the spring. If Ashwood is registered. If we’re part of an organized authority.” She glanced at her husband. “Daniel thinks it’s the only way.”

“It’s not about you,” Daniel said roughly. “It’s about nine thousand people. It’s about all of them.”

“I know, sweetheart.” Ellen squeezed Ethan’s hand and let it go. “But it’s a little bit about me, too. And that’s all right. You’re allowed to love your wife.”

Daniel Brooks put his face in his hands.

Ethan sat very still. He thought of Emily’s reading glasses on the windowsill. Her Bible by the coffee maker. The crayon drawing on the refrigerator.

He thought: *If I could have saved her by signing a form, would I have done it?*

He knew the answer. He didn’t like it.

“Daniel,” he said finally. “I’m not going to pretend I know what you’re feeling. I’d be lying. I lost Emily in a second. I never got the chance to bargain for her.” He took a breath. “But I have to tell you what I believe. And I believe that if we sign that form, we’re not just joining an alliance against Kane. We’re putting our names in a book that somebody wrote before the world ended. And I don’t think we’re ever going to get them back out.”

“You don’t know that.”

“No. I don’t.” Ethan leaned forward. “But I know this. Rebecca’s father preached for thirty-one years that a day was coming when a man would rise up and promise peace and bread to the whole world, and that he would demand something in return. Everybody laughed at him. *I* laughed at him. And then every single thing he said came true — the vanishing, the wars, the famines, the man on the radio promising peace and safety.” He paused. “At some point, Daniel, you have to start believing the man who got it right.”

Brooks lifted his head. His eyes were red.

“So what’s your answer, then? Stay alone? Stay independent and starve with our flag flying?”

“Stay independent,” Ethan said. “But not alone. We help Millbrook anyway. Not because a council tells us to. Because they’re our neighbors. We send Sarah up there to look at their well. We send them medicine we can spare. We send them seed in the spring. We take in refugees as long as we can feed them, and we pray God stretches the bread.” He spread his hands. “And we fight Kane ourselves, if we have to. With whoever will stand with us freely.”

“That’s not a plan, Ethan. That’s a sermon.”

“Maybe.” Ethan almost smiled. “Samuel Graves told Sarah something last week. He said the Lord never gives you tomorrow’s bread today.”

Brooks laughed — a short, bitter, exhausted sound. “Easy for Samuel to say. Samuel’s not the one who has to decide.”

“No,” Ethan said. “You are.”

Brooks looked at him for a long time across the lamplit table. Then he looked at his wife.

“No,” he said at last. “I’m not.”

Ethan frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I’m not going to decide this. Not by myself. Not for nine thousand people.” Brooks straightened in his chair, and something came back into his face that Ethan had not seen in weeks — something steady and stubborn and quietly proud. “Jack’s been telling me for a month that I should suspend the council and run this town by emergency decree. He says wars aren’t won by committee. Maybe he’s right. Kane doesn’t hold elections. Ray Talbot doesn’t hold elections.” He shook his head. “But the day I start making decisions like this by myself, I’m no different than Marcus Kane. I’m just a nicer version of him.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to put it to a vote.” Brooks took off his glasses and polished them slowly on his shirt. “Town meeting. Every registered resident over eighteen. I’ll make my case. You make yours. Talbot’s got until the twentieth, so we’ll vote on the fourteenth. And whatever the people decide —” he put the glasses back on — “I’ll abide by it. Even if I think they’re wrong.”

He looked at his wife.

“Even if it costs me everything.”

Ellen Brooks reached over and took her husband’s hand. Her eyes were shining.

“That,” she said softly, “is why I married you.”

* * *

Hillside Farm — The Graves Place

November 9 — 6:30 a.m.

Samuel Graves’s farmhouse sat on a knoll a mile north of town, a white clapboard foursquare with green shutters, a red barn, and six hundred acres of soybean stubble stretching away toward the tree line. It had been in the Graves family since 1878. Samuel said it would probably be in the Graves family until the Lord came back, since there wasn’t anybody left to sell it to.

Rebecca sat at his kitchen table in the gray dawn with her father’s Bible open in front of her and a cup of chicory growing cold beside it. She had not slept.

Across from her sat Rachel Monroe, wrapped in one of Samuel’s wife’s cardigans, with the Framework’s Appendix F spread out on the oilcloth before her. Samuel stood at the wood cookstove, frying three eggs in a cast-iron skillet with the solemnity of a man performing surgery.

“Three eggs,” he announced. “The hens have decided to be generous this week. The Lord be praised.” He slid one onto each of their plates. “Eat. You can’t save the world on an empty stomach.”

“We’re not trying to save the world,” Rebecca said wearily. “Just Ashwood.”

“Same thing, some days.” Samuel lowered himself into his chair with a grunt and bowed his head. “Lord, thank You for these eggs and these hens and these two young women at my table. Give us wisdom, because heaven knows we’re short on it. Amen.”

“Amen,” Rebecca said.

Rachel said nothing. But Rebecca noticed that she had waited, fork in hand, until the prayer was finished before she began to eat.

“The whole town’s talking about the vote,” Rebecca said after a while. “I stopped by the Rialto yesterday. People were arguing in the ration line. Somebody’s painted **JOIN THE COMPACT — LIVE** on the side of the old Sunoco station. And somebody else painted over half of it last night, so now it just says **JOIN THE COMPACT — LIE.**” She shook her head. “Noah says his youth group split right down the middle. Half of them want to join because their parents do. The other half think the registration’s the mark of the beast.”

“It isn’t,” Samuel said, calmly salting his egg.

Both women looked at him.

“It isn’t the mark,” the old man said. “Not yet. The mark comes later. Revelation thirteen. ‘*And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark.*’” He took a bite of egg. “This is a form. It’s a list. It’s a census.”

“So you think we should sign it?” Rachel asked, surprised.

“I didn’t say that.” Samuel chewed slowly. “I said it isn’t the mark. But every road has a first mile, young lady. Nobody walks into the lion’s den all at once. First you give them your name. Then you give them your address. Then you give them your religion, because the box says *optional* and it seems rude not to. And then one day a man with a satellite phone comes back with a new form, and this time the box isn’t optional.” He set down his fork. “The devil’s patient. He doesn’t need you to bow down on the first day. He just needs you to get used to standing in line.”

Rebecca stared at him. “Samuel, that’s the best thing I’ve ever heard you say.”

“Well, don’t tell anybody. I’ve got a reputation for being a simple farmer.” But his eyes twinkled.

Rachel was looking down at Appendix F. Her voice, when she spoke, was very quiet.

“There’s a section at the end of this appendix I haven’t shown anyone,” she said. “I didn’t understand it at first. I thought it was just bureaucratic language.” She turned a page and read aloud. “*Phase Two registration data shall be used to identify populations likely to resist integration into the unified relief framework. Particular attention should be given to communities organized around exclusive religious identities, which historically demonstrate low compliance with centralized authority. Such communities should be offered incentives to participate. Where incentives prove insufficient, access to relief may be conditioned accordingly.*”

She looked up.

“*Access to relief may be conditioned accordingly*,” she repeated. “That means if you don’t cooperate, you don’t eat. And they’ve already decided who’s most likely not to cooperate.” She tapped the box on the registration form. *RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION (OPTIONAL).* “That’s what this box is for. It isn’t optional. It’s a filter.”

The kitchen was silent except for the crackle of the wood stove.

Rebecca looked down at her father’s Bible. It had fallen open, the way it often did, to a page he had read so many times that the binding remembered it. Second Chronicles. She hadn’t been looking for it. But there, in faded blue ink, a passage was underlined twice.

She read it aloud.

“‘*At that time Hanani the seer came to Asa king of Judah, and said unto him, Because thou hast relied on the king of Syria, and not relied on the LORD thy God, therefore is the host of the king of Syria escaped out of thine hand… 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. Herein thou hast done foolishly: therefore from henceforth thou shalt have wars.'"

In the margin, her father had written: *Asa trusted God against a million men. Then he trusted a treaty against one. Alliances are not sin. Trusting them instead of God is. — C.W.*

She read it twice. Then she closed the Bible and looked at Samuel.

"Dad would have voted no," she said.

"I expect he would have."

"But Daniel Brooks isn't wrong, either. People are going to die. Ellen Brooks is going to die. Sarah doesn't have enough insulin to get to spring." Rebecca's voice shook. "How do I stand up in front of this town and tell a man to let his wife die because of a checkbox on a form?"

Samuel Graves reached across the table and laid his gnarled, work-worn hand over hers.

"You don't," he said gently. "You don't tell anybody to let anybody die. That's not your job, Rebecca. Your job is to tell them the truth. And then trust God with what they do with it." He squeezed her hand. "Your daddy didn't make anybody believe. He just kept telling the truth, every Sunday, for thirty-one years, whether anybody listened or not. The Lord did the rest." He smiled. "Took Him a while with some of us."

Across the table, Rachel Monroe was looking at the old farmer with an expression Rebecca could not quite read.

"You really believe that," Rachel said. "That God does the rest."

"I do."

"Even with the insulin running out. Even with Kane's guns six miles away."

"*Especially* then." Samuel picked up his fork again. "Anybody can trust God when the pantry's full, young lady. That's not faith. That's just good luck."

* * *

Ashwood — The Week of the Vote

November 10–13

The town split.

It did not happen all at once. It happened the way ice cracks on a pond in March — a sharp report in the silence, then a thin dark line spreading slowly across the surface, then another, and another, until the whole sheet is a web of fractures waiting for the first warm day to break it apart.

On Monday, a fistfight broke out in the ration line outside the Rialto between two men who had been fishing buddies for thirty years. One of them wanted to join the Compact. The other one didn't. Luis Ortega pulled them apart, and they stood on the sidewalk bleeding and shouting at each other until one of them burst into tears.

On Tuesday, Russ Keller held a meeting in the old co-op office. Two hundred people came. Keller stood on a feed-sack pallet and told them that the Compact was their only hope, that the international relief was real, that Ethan Walker and the preacher's daughter were going to get everybody killed over a Bible verse. The crowd cheered. Afterward, someone slashed the tires on Hal Whitaker's hay wagon.

On Wednesday, Gary Voss's son Kyle — twenty-four years old, married in March, with a baby due in January — stood in the middle of his father's milking parlor and told him he was voting yes. *Maggie's got preeclampsia, Dad. Sarah says she might need a C-section. Sarah says she might not have what she needs to do it. If the convoys come, they'll have medicine.* Gary Voss told his son that if he put his name on that list, he could find somewhere else to live. Kyle packed his truck and moved into town that night.

Gary did not come to Bible study that week. Rebecca heard he spent the whole night sitting in his barn with his cows.

On Thursday, someone painted a message in foot-high red letters across the front doors of First Baptist Church:

YOUR GOD CAN'T FEED US

Noah Simmons and his youth group spent the whole afternoon scrubbing it off. When they were finished, Noah climbed a stepladder and painted his own message, in neat white letters, on the plywood sign above the church's front steps:

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

Someone tore it down that night.

Noah painted it again the next morning.

And through all of it, Ethan Walker walked the town the way he always had — at dawn after the night watch, at dusk before the evening patrols — and listened.

He heard the arguments at the ration line and on the church steps and in the aisles of the tool library. He heard mothers who wanted medicine for their children and fathers who wanted their sons out of the fighting. He heard old men who remembered the Cold War talking about lists and registrations and what happened to people whose names were on them. He heard young men who had never known anything but smartphones and internet shrugging and saying, *Who cares if they have my name? Google had my name for twenty years.*

He heard Sarah Collins, alone in the supply room of the clinic late on Thursday night, praying out loud over a clipboard.

He stopped in the doorway without meaning to. She didn't see him. She was sitting on an overturned bucket with the supply inventory on her knees and her head bowed, and her voice was barely above a whisper.

"…and I don't know what to do, Lord. Because they're right. If the convoys come, I'll have antibiotics. I'll have insulin. I'll have oxygen and anesthesia and blood. I could save so many of them. Ellen.

Maggie Voss and her baby. Mr. Hollis. The kids in the camp." Her voice broke. "And I'm supposed to say no? I'm a doctor. My whole life is saying yes to anything that keeps people alive. How do I say no to *medicine*?"

She was quiet for a long time.

"Show me," she whispered finally. "Please. Just show me what You want. I'll do it. I just need to know."

Ethan backed silently out of the doorway and left her alone.

He did not have an answer for her. He did not have an answer for himself.

That night, alone in his kitchen, he opened Emily's Bible to the place marked with the pink sticky note, and kept reading from where she had stopped. Isaiah, chapter thirty.

"*Woe to the rebellious children, saith the LORD, that take counsel, but not of me; and that cover with a covering, but not of my spirit, that they may add sin to sin: That walk to go down into Egypt, and have not asked at my mouth; to strengthen themselves in the strength of Pharaoh, and to trust in the shadow of Egypt!*"

He read further.

"*For thus saith the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel; In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength: and ye would not.*"

And ye would not.

He sat at the table for a long time with those three words.

Then he went to bed, and for the first time in weeks, he slept.

* * *

First Baptist Church

November 14 — 6:00 p.m.

They voted by candlelight.

There was no other way to do it. The ballot box was an old oak offering chest from the church basement, its brass lock long broken, placed on a folding table at the foot of the pulpit. The ballots were squares of paper torn from old church bulletins, each one stamped on the back with the Ashwood town seal from the county recorder's office so they couldn't be forged. Every registered resident over eighteen — six thousand, four hundred and thirty-one of them, according to Hal Whitaker's ration rolls — had one vote.

The refugees in the camp did not vote. That had been its own bitter argument, two nights earlier, and it had nearly come to blows. In the end, the council had decided that only those who had lived in Ashwood before April could vote on Ashwood's future. Ethan had argued against it. He had lost.

He tried not to think about how many of the people in that camp would be marched into the snow if the vote went yes.

The debate came first.

Russ Keller spoke for the Compact. He spoke well — loud and confident and practical, a man who had run a grain business for twenty years and knew how to talk to farmers. He talked about arithmetic. About bushels and gallons and rounds of ammunition. About Kane's guns. About the relief convoys and the medicine they would bring. *I'm not asking you to trust some man in Europe,* he said. *I'm asking you to trust a doctor's supply list. I'm asking you to trust the calendar. February is coming, folks. It doesn't care what verse you've got painted on your church.*

People applauded. A lot of people.

Then Daniel Brooks rose.

He did not speak like Keller. He spoke quietly, haltingly, a tired man in wire-rimmed glasses who had never wanted to be anything but a car dealer. He told them he would vote yes. He told them why. He told them about the arithmetic, and about Kane, and about the four hundred men of the Compact who could stand beside them.

And then, to Ethan's astonishment, he told them about Ellen.

"My wife is going to run out of insulin in January," he said simply. "She's not the only one. There are nine of them. There are mothers who need C-sections and old men who need heart pills and children who need antibiotics. I'm not going to stand up here and pretend that has nothing to do with my vote. It does." He looked out over the silent sanctuary. "But I want you to know something else. Whatever you decide tonight, I'll abide by it. If you vote no, I will not sign that treaty. I will not go around you. I will not declare an emergency and do it anyway. I've been your mayor for eleven years, and I've never once told you that I knew better than you did about what's good for this town." He took off his glasses. "I'm not going to start tonight."

He sat down.

There was no applause. There was only a long, deep silence, the kind of silence that comes when people have been reminded of something they had forgotten they valued.

Then it was Ethan's turn.

He walked to the pulpit with his hands empty. He had not written anything. He had tried, three times, and torn it up each time.

He looked out over the sanctuary. The candles in the windows. The faces in the pews. Walt and Martha Kimble. Hal Whitaker with his cap in his hands. Gary Voss, sitting alone at the end of a pew, and his son Kyle, sitting with his pregnant wife on the opposite side of the church, neither of them looking at the other. Sarah in her scrubs near the side door. Rachel Monroe, pale and watchful, sitting beside Samuel Graves. Rebecca in the front row with her father's Bible in her lap. Noah in the balcony. Jack at the back, arms folded, face like stone.

Daniel Brooks, sitting with his wife's hand in his.

“I’m not going to tell you how to vote,” Ethan said. “Daniel’s right. That’s not my job.”

He took a breath.

“I just want to tell you what I’ve learned in the last six months. That’s all I’ve got.” He looked down at the pulpit, then back up. “Six months ago, I didn’t believe in anything. I thought the only thing that kept people alive was strength. Guns and walls and whoever was toughest. And when my wife and daughter disappeared, I was sure of it. There wasn’t any God. If there had been, He wouldn’t have taken them.” He paused. “I was wrong. I don’t say that easily. I was a cop for twelve years. I don’t like being wrong.”

A ripple of quiet, surprised laughter moved through the pews.

“But I was. And the thing I was most wrong about was this: I thought the most dangerous thing in the world was a man with a gun. It’s not. Marcus Kane’s dangerous. Ray Talbot’s dangerous. But the most dangerous thing in the world is a man who offers you exactly what you need — bread, medicine, safety — and asks you for something small in return. Something that doesn’t seem to matter. Your name. Your address. Your religion, if you don’t mind.” He paused. “Just a little box on a form.”

The sanctuary was utterly silent.

“I don’t know who wrote that form. I don’t know what they want. Neither does anybody else in this room. But I know it was printed before the world ended. And I know the people who printed it decided, before any of us knew what was coming, that people like us — people who pray, people who won’t bow — were a problem to be managed.” He looked out at them. “I don’t want Ashwood to be managed. I want Ashwood to be *free.* Free to feed who we want to feed. Free to help our neighbors because we love them, not because a council tells us to. Free to open our gate to a starving family from Marion without asking some office in Columbus for permission.”

He looked at Daniel and Ellen Brooks.

“And I know what it might cost,” he said quietly. “I know. I’m not going to stand up here and pretend it’s free. It isn’t. Freedom has never been free. Not in 1776. Not now.” His voice caught. “But I believe God sees us. I believe He sees Ellen Brooks and Maggie Voss and every kid in that camp. I believe that the same God who fed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish hasn’t forgotten how. And I believe, with everything I’ve got, that the moment we trade our freedom for bread, we’ll find out we’ve lost both.”

He stepped back from the pulpit.

“‘*In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength.*’ That’s Isaiah thirty. My wife was reading it the week before she left.” He swallowed. “The next line says, *and ye would not.*” He looked out over the town. “I hope we will.”

He walked back to his seat.

For a long moment, no one moved.

Then Mayor Brooks rose and said simply, “The ballot box is open.”

* * *

The voting took four hours.

They came up the center aisle one by one, more than six thousand of them, some quickly, some slowly, some leaning on canes and walkers, some carrying sleeping children. They dropped their squares of paper into the old oak offering chest and walked out through the side door into the cold, where Noah's youth group handed each of them a cup of hot chicory and a biscuit. Some of them stopped at the door and looked back, as if they wanted to say something. Most of them didn't.

Kyle Voss voted with his wife beside him. Afterward, he walked out the side door, stopped on the steps, and looked back through the window at his father, who was still sitting alone at the end of his pew. He stood there for a long time. Then he went home.

Ellen Brooks voted. So did Daniel. They walked up the aisle together, holding hands, and dropped their ballots into the chest at the same moment. Ethan never asked either of them how they had voted.

At eleven o'clock, the last ballot was cast.

Hal Whitaker, Janet Morrow from the grain elevator, and Pastor Samuel Graves counted them at a folding table beneath the pulpit, by the light of four kerosene lanterns, while Luis Ortega stood guard with a shotgun and two hundred people who had refused to go home watched from the pews. They counted every ballot three times. It took almost two hours.

At 12:54 in the morning, Samuel Graves pushed himself up from the table, leaning heavily on his hickory cane, and handed a single sheet of paper to Mayor Daniel Brooks.

Brooks read it. His face did not change.

He walked slowly to the pulpit and stood there for a long moment, looking at the paper in his hands. Then he looked up at the two hundred exhausted people in the pews.

"On the question of whether the town of Ashwood shall accept the terms of the Tri-County Compact," he said, "the vote is as follows."

He adjusted his glasses.

"For the Compact — three thousand, one hundred and forty-seven."

A murmur rippled through the pews.

"Against the Compact — three thousand, two hundred and sixty-eight."

For a moment there was total silence.

Then someone in the back began to clap. And someone else shouted, "*No!*" And a woman in the balcony began to weep — whether from relief or grief, Ethan could not tell. And all at once the church was full of noise: cheering and shouting and crying and arguing, neighbors embracing each other and neighbors turning away from each other, the sound of a town that had just chosen its future and had broken itself in half to do it.

One hundred and twenty-one votes.

Out of more than six thousand.

Ethan sat very still in the second pew and did not move. He did not cheer. He did not feel like cheering. He looked across the church at Russ Keller, who was standing near the side door with his jaw clenched and his face dark red. He looked at Kyle and Maggie Voss, holding each other in the corner. He looked at Sarah, who had closed her eyes and was pressing her hand against her mouth.

He looked at Daniel Brooks, standing alone at the pulpit with the paper in his hand.

The mayor raised his free hand. Slowly, the noise died down.

“The people have spoken,” Brooks said. His voice was hoarse but clear. “Ashwood will remain independent. I’ll send word to the Compact’s Council in the morning.” He paused. “I want to thank every one of you for voting. Those who voted yes and those who voted no. You did something tonight that almost nobody else in this country is doing anymore. You governed yourselves.” He looked down at the paper. “I know half of you are angry. I know some of you are frightened. So am I. But we did this together. And whatever comes next, we’ll face it together. That’s the only way Ashwood survives.”

He folded the paper and put it in his pocket.

“Go home,” he said gently. “Get some sleep. God bless you all.”

* * *

Ethan found him an hour later, sitting alone on the courthouse steps in the freezing dark, looking up at the flag.

He sat down beside him. For a long time, neither of them spoke.

“You lost,” Ethan said finally.

“I lost.” Brooks’s breath smoked in the cold air. “Close, though.”

“Daniel, I’m sorry. About Ellen. About —”

“Don’t.” Brooks shook his head. “Don’t apologize. You said what you believed. So did I. The people decided.” He was quiet for a moment. “That’s how it’s supposed to work, Ethan. I just never realized how much it hurts when it does.”

They sat in silence.

“She voted no,” Brooks said.

Ethan turned to look at him.

“Ellen. She told me on the way home.” The mayor’s voice was very soft. “She said she’d been reading Isaiah too. She said she wasn’t going to buy another six months of life by putting her name in that book. She said if the Lord wanted her to see spring, He’d find a way. And if He didn’t —” His voice broke. “She said she’d be with Him, and that wasn’t anything to be afraid of.”

Ethan could not speak.

“Thirty-one years I’ve been married to that woman,” Daniel Brooks said. “And I never once saw her afraid of anything. I used to think it was just her personality.” He wiped his eyes with the back of his glove. “I’m starting to think it was something else.”

He looked up at the tattered flag, stirring faintly in the dark wind.

“‘*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want,*’” he said quietly. “My mother made me memorize that when I was six. I haven’t said it out loud in forty years.” He shook his head. “Funny what comes back.”

“It’s not funny,” Ethan said. “It’s grace.”

Brooks looked at him for a long moment. Then, slowly, he nodded.

Behind them, the courthouse door opened, and Jack Reynolds came out onto the steps with his rifle slung and his field radio in his hand. His face was grim.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he said. “Ridge One just called in from the south observation post. They’ve been watching Route 13 since midnight.” He paused. “Ethan, there’s people coming. On foot. From the direction of Mansfield.”

Ethan stood up. “How many?”

“They can’t tell. It’s too dark. They can just see the lights. Flashlights. Lanterns. Torches.” Jack looked south, toward the dark horizon. “They say the line of lights is two miles long. And it’s still coming.”

Daniel Brooks rose slowly to his feet beside them.

The three men stood together on the courthouse steps in the freezing dark, beneath the tattered flag, and looked south.

And far away, beyond the last fields and the dark hardwood forests, like a river of tiny stars flowing down the black ribbon of Route 13 toward Ashwood, they could see the lights.

“*When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.*”

— Isaiah 43:2

* * *

END OF CHAPTER 4

Part Two — The Gathering Storm

CHAPTER 5

Refugees at the Gate

"*For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in.*"

— Matthew 25:35

* * *

South Gate, Ashwood, Ohio

November 15 — 6:52 a.m.

The first of them reached the gate just as the sun came up.

Ethan had been standing in the plywood watchtower above the two school buses for three hours, watching the line of lights crawl toward him down Route 13. In the darkness, it had looked almost beautiful — a slow river of flashlights and lanterns and torches winding through the black fields like a candlelight procession. He had watched it and prayed and tried to guess how many there were.

Now, in the gray November dawn, the lights were going out one by one, and he could see them.

And it was not beautiful at all.

They filled the highway from ditch to ditch for as far as he could see. Hundreds of them. Men and women and children, old and young, walking in a long, ragged, shuffling column that stretched back over the crest of the hill and out of sight. They pushed shopping carts and baby strollers and wheelbarrows piled with blankets and pots and plastic bags. They pulled children's wagons with grandmothers riding in them. They carried babies in their arms and toddlers on their shoulders and everything they owned on their backs. A few led skeletal horses or goats on ropes. One old man pushed a wheelchair with a woman in it who did not move.

They were silent. That was the worst of it. Eight hundred people, maybe more, and the only sounds were the shuffle of feet on asphalt, the squeak of cart wheels, and somewhere far back in the column, a child coughing, and coughing, and coughing.

Beside him, Luis Ortega lowered his binoculars. His face was gray.

"Commander," he said quietly. "I count at least seven hundred. Could be a thousand. The end of the line's still over the hill."

Below them, on both sides of the buses, forty Ashwood volunteers stood behind sandbags with their rifles pointed at the road. Ethan could see their faces. Farmers. Teachers. Mechanics. Donna Pierce, the realtor. A boy from Noah's youth group who couldn't have been more than seventeen. They were

looking at the approaching column with the expressions of people watching a flood come down a valley toward their homes.

The first refugees stopped fifty yards from the barricade.

They did not rush the gate. They did not shout or wave their arms. They simply stopped, and stood in the road, and waited — hundreds of hollow faces lifted toward the buses and the watchtower and the rifles — and the silence stretched out across the frozen fields until Ethan thought it would break him.

Then a single figure stepped out from the front of the column and walked forward alone.

He was an old Black man, tall and stooped, wearing a long gray overcoat that had once been expensive and a brown fedora with a feather in the band. He carried no weapon. He walked with a carved wooden cane, slowly, deliberately, the way a man walks down the aisle of a church, and he stopped twenty feet from the sandbags and took off his hat.

“Good morning,” he called up to the watchtower. His voice was deep and rich and cracked with exhaustion. “My name is Isaiah Freeman. I was a deacon at Second Calvary Baptist Church in Mansfield for thirty-one years.” He paused. “I’d like to speak with whoever is in charge of this town.”

Ethan climbed down the ladder.

* * *

He met Isaiah Freeman in the narrow gap between the two school buses, beneath the steel cattle gate, with Ortega and two volunteers at his back.

Up close, the old man was even older than he had looked from the tower — seventy-five at least, with a close-cropped white beard and deep lines carved into his dark face. His eyes were bloodshot and his lips were cracked from the cold. But he stood straight, and he looked Ethan directly in the face.

“You’re the one they call Walker,” Freeman said. “We heard about you on the road. They say you’re a fair man.”

“I try to be.”

“That’s more than most can say these days.” Freeman turned his hat slowly in his hands. “There are eight hundred and forty-three of us, Mr. Walker. I know, because I’ve counted every night for six days. There were nine hundred and six when we started.”

Ethan felt the number go through him like cold water.

“Where did you come from?”

“The camp at Ontario, west of Mansfield. The old distribution center by the interstate. There were four thousand of us there, give or take, since the summer. People from Mansfield, Shelby, Galion, Crestline. People who’d lost their homes, or had them taken.” The old man’s jaw tightened. “Seven nights ago, men came into the camp just after midnight. Maybe a hundred of them. They had trucks and rifles and uniforms. Camouflage. They set fire to the tents. They took the food. They shot anyone who tried to stop them.” He paused. “Then they drove the rest of us out onto the highway and pointed east. They told us, *Go to Ashwood. Ashwood has food. Ashwood has a doctor. Ashwood takes everybody.*”

Behind Ethan, Luis Ortega swore softly in Spanish.

“Did you see any patches?” Ethan asked. “Insignia?”

Freeman nodded slowly. “A gray mountain on a black field. And two words.” He looked Ethan in the eye. “*Iron Ridge*.”

For a long moment, Ethan could not speak.

“We scattered, the first night,” Freeman went on quietly. “Some went north. Some went south, toward Columbus, God help them. Most of us came this way, because that’s the way they pushed us, and because we’d heard about this town. We heard there was a church here where the people still pray. We heard you’d fed people from Mansfield and Marion.” He swallowed. “We’ve been walking six days. We ran out of food on the third. We’ve buried sixty-three people in the ditches along Route 13. Mostly the very old and the very young. The cold took some. The fever took more.”

“The fever,” Ethan repeated.

“It’s in the column. Has been since Ontario. Coughing and burning up and aching in the bones.” The old man looked back over his shoulder at the silent crowd. “I won’t lie to you, Mr. Walker. We’re bringing sickness with us. And hunger. And I know what that means for a town like yours. I know you’ve got your own people to think of.” His voice dropped. “I’m not here to demand anything. I’m here to ask. That’s all. Just to ask.”

He turned his hat in his hands.

“There are a hundred and eighty children in that line,” he said. “Some of them haven’t eaten in four days. Whatever you decide about the rest of us — about me — I’m asking you, in the name of Jesus Christ, to let the children in.”

* * *

The Guardhouse — South Gate

7:40 a.m.

The guardhouse had been built for two people selling parking passes. Now nine people crowded into it, standing shoulder to shoulder around the potbelly stove, with the frost-covered window looking out on the silent column in the road.

Mayor Brooks. Jack. Sarah, still in the scrubs she’d been wearing all night. Hal Whitaker. Rebecca. Daniel Mercer. Russ Keller, who had come down from the co-op the moment he heard. Samuel Graves, leaning on his cane in the corner. And Ethan.

He told them everything Isaiah Freeman had told him.

When he was finished, Daniel Mercer was the first to speak.

“He did it on purpose,” Mercer said. His voice was flat and cold. “Kane. He burned that camp and drove them here deliberately. I’ve seen it before — in the Balkans, in Syria. You don’t have to attack a town if you can make it collapse from the inside. Push eight hundred starving, sick people up against its

walls, and one of two things happens.” He held up one finger. “It takes them in, and its food runs out twice as fast, and the sickness spreads through its population, and by February it’s too weak to fight.” He held up a second finger. “Or it turns them away, and they die in the snow in front of its gates, and the town tears itself apart with guilt and rage. And either way, Kane wins.” He lowered his hand. “It’s the cruelest thing I’ve ever seen a man do. And it’s brilliant.”

The guardhouse was silent except for the crackle of the stove.

“Then we can’t take them,” Russ Keller said.

Everyone turned to look at him.

“I’m sorry. I know how that sounds.” Keller held up his hands. “But you heard him. Mercer’s the expert. This is a *weapon.* Kane is using these people as a weapon against us. And if we let them in, we’re doing exactly what he wants.” He turned to Hal. “Tell them the numbers, Hal. Tell them what eight hundred more mouths means.”

Hal Whitaker had been silent, his cap in his hands. When he spoke, his voice was very quiet.

“We’ve got fourteen hundred people in the camp who aren’t on the old rolls,” he said. “Plus nine thousand residents. We cut rations another quarter last week, after the vote. That got us to the middle of March.” He paused. “Eight hundred more, at current rations — we run out in the second week of February. Maybe sooner.”

“Five weeks,” Keller said. “That’s what they cost us. Five weeks of food. For every man, woman, and child in Ashwood.” He looked around the guardhouse. “And that’s not counting the fever. Doc, how many of them are sick?”

Sarah didn’t answer right away. She was looking out the frosted window at the column.

“I don’t know,” she said finally. “I haven’t examined them. But if they’ve had influenza moving through them for a week in the cold with no food — it could be a third of them. Maybe more.” She turned from the window. “And some of those will have pneumonia. And some of them will die no matter what I do.”

“And if they bring it into town?”

Sarah was silent for a long moment. “Then more of *ours* will die too,” she said. “The old ones. The babies. Anyone with a weak heart or bad lungs.” She pressed her hands against her eyes. “Russ is right about that. I’m not going to pretend he isn’t.”

Keller looked around the room with the grim satisfaction of a man who has been proven right. “So. We give them what food we can spare — a day’s worth, two days’ — and we send them north to the Compact. Or south to Columbus. Or anywhere. We’re sorry. But we’re not the only town in Ohio.”

“We’re the only town that’ll take them,” Rebecca said quietly.

“That’s not our fault.”

“No. But it’s our responsibility.”

Keller turned to her, and there was genuine anger in his face now. “With respect, Rebecca, you don’t get to say that. You’re not the one who has to feed them. Hal is. I am. And I’m telling you, if we let eight hundred more people through that gate, then in February I’m going to have to stand in front of the Rialto and tell mothers in Ashwood that there’s nothing left for their kids.” His voice cracked. “Their kids. *Our* kids. You want to stand next to me and explain to them why a stranger’s child is more important than theirs?”

The guardhouse fell silent.

And Ethan saw, in that moment, that Russ Keller was not a villain. Whatever else he was — whatever else he might be — he was a frightened man doing arithmetic, the same arithmetic Hal was doing, the same arithmetic Ethan did every night lying awake. He was wrong. But he was not evil.

That somehow made it worse.

“Nobody’s child is more important than anybody else’s,” Rebecca said softly. “That’s the whole point, Russ.”

“Then how do we choose?” Keller spread his hands. “Tell me. How do we choose?”

Nobody answered.

It was Jack who finally broke the silence.

“There’s another problem,” he said. He had been standing by the door with his arms folded, watching the column through the window with a soldier’s eyes. “Mercer’s right that Kane drove them here. So ask yourself — would Kane drive eight hundred people to our gate and *not* put his own people in the line?”

Ethan felt his stomach tighten. He had already thought of it.

“Scouts,” Jack said. “Saboteurs. Men who’ll walk through our gate with the refugees, learn every inch of this town, and be waiting inside when Kane’s army comes. Maybe a dozen of them. Maybe more.” He looked at Ethan. “I’d do it, if I were him. It’s exactly what I’d do.”

“So we screen them,” Brooks said.

“Screen eight hundred people? With what? We don’t have records. We don’t have ID. Half of them don’t have shoes.” Jack shook his head. “We can look for fighting-age men traveling alone. We can check for weapons. We can look at their hands and their boots — a man who’s been walking six days from Ontario looks different from a man who rode in a truck to the last crossroads and got out. But we’ll miss some. We will absolutely miss some.”

Mayor Brooks took off his glasses and polished them slowly.

“So,” he said. “We have eight hundred and forty-three people at our gate. We can’t feed them all. We can’t treat them all. We can’t screen them all. And we can’t turn them all away without watching them die in the snow.” He put his glasses back on. “Does anyone have an answer?”

For a long moment, no one did.

Then Russ Keller cleared his throat.

“I have a compromise,” he said. “We take *some*. Not all. We choose the ones who can help us.” He looked around the guardhouse. “Doctors. Nurses. Mechanics. Electricians. Farmers who know livestock. Men who’ve served in the military and can fight. Anybody with skills we need. We take them, and their immediate families. We give the rest food for three days and send them north.” He shrugged. “It’s not perfect. But it’s the only way this town survives. We bring in the people who make us stronger, and we let go of the ones who make us weaker.”

To Ethan’s surprise, there was a murmur of reluctant agreement. Hal Whitaker looked down at his cap and nodded slowly. Even Sarah looked torn.

“It’s practical,” Brooks admitted quietly. “I’ll give you that, Russ. It’s practical.”

Rebecca Whitfield stepped forward.

“Mr. Mayor,” she said. “May I ask a question?”

Brooks nodded.

“Rachel showed us a form last week,” Rebecca said. “The registration form from the International Relief Coordination Office. The one we voted against.” She paused. “Does anyone remember what was on it?”

The guardhouse went very quiet.

“Name,” Rebecca said. “Age. Address. *Occupation. Health status. Special skills.*” She looked at Russ Keller. “We voted against putting our names on a list so that somebody far away could decide who was worth feeding and who wasn’t. We voted against letting someone sort human beings by how useful they were.” Her voice did not rise. It did not need to. “And now, one day later, we’re standing in a guardhouse deciding which of those people out there are useful enough to live.”

No one spoke.

“I’m not saying that to shame anybody,” Rebecca said, and her voice softened. “Russ, I know you’re scared. So am I. I know we can’t take everybody forever. But if we start choosing people by their skills — if we let in the nurse and turn away the grandmother, if we let in the mechanic and send away the widow with four kids — then we’ve become exactly the thing we voted against. We’ve just done it with a nicer face.” She looked around the room. “And then what was the vote for?”

For a long time, there was no sound but the stove.

Then Samuel Graves pushed himself away from the corner, leaning heavily on his hickory cane, and cleared his throat.

“Mind if an old farmer says something?”

Brooks gestured for him to go ahead.

“I’ve been listening to all of you,” Samuel said, “and you’re all right. That’s the trouble. Russ is right that we can’t feed everybody forever. Hal’s right about the numbers. Sarah’s right about the fever.

Jack’s right about Kane’s men. And Rebecca’s right that we can’t sort people like cattle at an auction.” He shook his head. “You’re all right, and you’re all stuck, because you’re all thinking like town folks.”

“How should we be thinking, Samuel?” Brooks asked.

“Like farmers.” The old man’s eyes twinkled faintly. “Do you know the story of Ruth?”

“Vaguely,” Keller said.

“Ruth was a foreigner. A refugee. Her husband died, and she followed her mother-in-law back to Bethlehem with nothing but the clothes on her back. No food. No home. No way to live.” Samuel leaned on his cane. “And the law of Moses said that when a farmer harvested his field, he wasn’t supposed to reap the corners. He was supposed to leave the edges for the poor and the stranger. ‘*And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field… thou shalt leave them for the poor and stranger: I am the LORD your God.*’ Leviticus nineteen.” He looked around the room. “So Ruth went out and gleaned in the field of a man named Boaz. And Boaz told his workers to drop a little extra on purpose, so she’d find it. And she worked, and she ate, and she lived. And she became the great-grandmother of King David, and the ancestor of Jesus Christ.”

He paused.

“God didn’t build a refugee camp for Ruth,” he said quietly. “He put her in a field.”

Hal Whitaker’s head came up slowly.

“The farms,” Hal said.

“The farms.” Samuel nodded. “There’s forty-some farms inside Jack’s perimeter and on the edges of it. Every one of them has barns and bunkhouses and summer kitchens and empty bedrooms where the children used to sleep before they moved to Columbus, or before they vanished. I’ve got six hundred acres and four empty bedrooms and a hay barn you could fit fifty people in. Hal’s got more. The Vosses, the Hartmans, the Marshes, the Lindquists.” He shrugged. “We take them in. Not into a camp. Into our homes. Families. A few at a time. They work beside us through the winter — mending fence, cutting firewood, butchering, tending stock, getting the ground ready for spring. We’ll need the hands come April. God knows we will. And come summer, when the harvest comes in, they’ll have planted it.”

“That doesn’t make more food,” Keller said. “It just moves the mouths around.”

“It makes more food come summer,” Hal said slowly, and there was something awake in his face that had not been there in weeks. “Every extra pair of hands in April is another acre planted. Another row of potatoes. Another quarter-acre of beans. We’ve got land sitting fallow all over this county because there’s nobody to work it.” He looked at Keller. “Russ, we lost half our farm labor in the vanishing. You know that. If we put eight hundred people to work on that ground — the ones who can work, and the rest helping in the kitchens and the barns — we could double what we plant next spring.”

“If we make it to next spring.”

“If we make it to next spring,” Hal agreed. “It’ll be tight. It’ll be terrible tight. We’ll have to cut rations again. Everybody will be hungry.” He turned his cap in his hands. “But I’d rather be hungry with those folks planting my fields than full with them dying in my ditch.”

The guardhouse was quiet.

“And the fever?” Sarah asked.

“Quarantine,” Jack said slowly. He was thinking now, his tactical mind turning over the problem. “Before anybody goes anywhere, they go through the old livestock barns at the east end of the fairgrounds. Ten days. That’s the incubation window, right, Doc?”

“For influenza, less. Seven days would catch most of it.”

“Ten, to be safe. Anybody who gets sick stays in the isolation barns. Anybody who stays well goes to the farms.” Jack nodded. “And while they’re in quarantine, my people get to know them. Talk to them. Watch them. Look at their hands and their boots. Ask them where they’re from and ask again three days later and see if the story changes.” He looked at Ethan. “We won’t catch all of Kane’s people. But we’ll catch some. And the ones who make it through will be on farms, spread out, with families watching them. Not bunched up in a camp in the middle of town.”

Mayor Brooks looked around the room. At Hal, whose weathered face was set with stubborn determination. At Sarah, who was already making lists in her head. At Jack. At Rebecca. At Samuel Graves, leaning on his cane and smiling faintly.

At Russ Keller, who stood by the stove with his arms folded and his mouth set in a hard line.

“Russ?” Brooks said.

Keller was silent for a long time.

“I think it’s a mistake,” he said finally. “I think we’re going to regret it. I think in February, people are going to be eating their seed corn, and they’re going to remember who opened the gate.” He shook his head slowly. “But I’m not going to stand in front of eight hundred people and tell them to go die. Not with a hundred and eighty kids in that line.” He looked at Rebecca. “You win, Rebecca. God help us all.”

“It’s not about winning, Russ,” Rebecca said gently.

Keller looked at her with an expression Ethan could not read. Then he turned and walked out of the guardhouse into the cold.

* * *

The South Gate

9:15 a.m.

Ethan climbed back up the ladder into the watchtower and stood at the rail, looking down at the column.

Eight hundred and forty-three faces looked back up at him. Silent. Waiting.

He had spoken to crowds before. As a cop, he had talked down angry mobs outside bars and stood in front of grieving families and given statements to television cameras. But he had never spoken to anyone like this. He had never held so many lives in a single sentence.

Isaiah Freeman stood at the front of the column, his hat in his hands.

Ethan cupped his hands around his mouth.

“My name is Ethan Walker,” he called out. His voice carried across the frozen fields in the cold, still air. “I’m the commander of the Community Guard in Ashwood.” He paused. “Ashwood is going to take you in.”

For a moment, nothing happened. It was as if the words had not reached them. As if they had been turned away so many times, from so many towns, that they no longer recognized the sound of *yes.*

Then someone near the front began to cry.

And then the sound spread down the column like wind moving through a field of wheat — not cheering, not shouting, but a low, rising wave of weeping and murmuring and prayer, rippling back over the crest of the hill and out of sight. A woman sank to her knees in the middle of the highway with a baby clutched against her chest. A man threw his arms around the teenage boy beside him. An old woman in a wheelchair lifted both hands toward the sky.

Isaiah Freeman stood perfectly still. His eyes were closed. His lips were moving.

“All of you,” Ethan called. “Every one of you. But there are conditions, and you need to hear them.” He waited until the sound died down. “Anyone carrying a firearm will surrender it at the gate. You’ll get it back when you leave, or when you’ve been here long enough for us to trust you. Everyone will go into quarantine at the fairgrounds for ten days. Our doctor will examine every one of you. The sick will be cared for in separate barns. After ten days, those who are well will be placed with families on the farms around Ashwood, where you’ll work through the winter.” He paused. “I won’t lie to you. It’s going to be hard. We don’t have enough food. Everyone in this town — everyone who lives here and everyone who comes in — is going to be hungry this winter. But we’ll be hungry together.”

He looked down at the old deacon.

“Mr. Freeman,” he said. “Bring your people in.”

* * *

Not everyone came.

It started at the back of the column, where a knot of men had been standing apart from the others since dawn. Ethan had noticed them from the tower — forty or fifty of them, mostly young, mostly men, clustered around a pair of pickup trucks with no gas that they had been pushing by hand. They were better fed than the others. They carried rifles and shotguns openly, slung over their shoulders, and they had not knelt or wept or prayed when Ethan spoke.

When the column began to move toward the gate, they stayed where they were.

Then one of them walked forward.

He was about forty, broad and bearded, wearing a black leather motorcycle vest over a hooded sweatshirt, with a semiautomatic rifle on a sling across his chest. He walked with the loose, rolling swagger of a man who was used to other men getting out of his way. He stopped beside the sandbags and looked up at Ethan.

“Name’s Boyd Strickland,” he said. “Me and my boys have been looking after these people on the road. Keeping ’em safe from bandits and such.” He grinned. “We’ll be coming in with ’em. But we keep our guns.”

“Everyone surrenders their weapons at the gate,” Ethan said.

“Yeah, I heard. That’s for them.” Strickland jerked his thumb toward the refugees. “Not for us. We’re not refugees. We’re security. You’ll want us, Walker. Word on the road is you’ve got a war coming. Kane. The Compact. Me and my boys have been fighting since April. We can help you.”

“If you want to help, surrender your weapons and go through quarantine like everyone else.”

Strickland’s grin didn’t change, but his eyes did.

“See, that’s not going to work for us.”

From the column behind Ethan, a woman’s voice cried out, sharp and bitter: “*Don’t let them in! They took our food! They took everything!*”

Ethan looked past Strickland at the woman — thin, middle-aged, clutching the hand of a little boy. Then another voice joined hers. A man’s. “*They took the water! They took the blankets! They said it was a toll!*” And another. And another.

“They made us pay,” someone shouted. “Every night. Food, or they’d leave us for the bandits. Some of us didn’t have food.” A pause. “So they took other things.”

The silence that followed was very cold.

Boyd Strickland’s grin had not moved. But his hand had drifted to the grip of his rifle.

Ethan looked down at him from the tower for a long moment. Then he looked at the fifty men standing behind him, well-fed and heavily armed, beside their useless pickup trucks.

He thought of Jack in the guardhouse. *Would Kane drive eight hundred people to our gate and not put his own people in the line?*

Maybe these were Kane’s men. Maybe they weren’t. Maybe they were just the kind of men who rose up in every dark place when the lights went out — men who saw other people’s desperation and turned it into profit.

It didn’t matter.

“Mr. Strickland,” Ethan said. “You and your men are not coming into Ashwood.”

Strickland’s grin finally disappeared.

“You’re making a mistake, Walker.”

“Maybe.” Ethan did not raise his voice. “But you and your men are going to turn around and walk back down Route 13. You’re going to take your guns and your trucks and whatever you took from these people, and you’re going to go. Right now.”

“Or what?”

Beside Ethan in the watchtower, Luis Ortega lifted his scoped rifle and rested it on the rail. Below, along the sandbags, forty rifles shifted almost imperceptibly toward the knot of men at the back of the column. In the second watchtower on the roof of the old Dairy Queen, Jack Reynolds appeared at the rail with a pair of binoculars in one hand and a radio in the other. He did not say anything. He did not have to.

Boyd Strickland looked up at the towers. He looked at the rifles along the sandbags. He looked at his fifty men.

Then he looked at the eight hundred refugees between him and the gate — and Ethan saw him realize, all at once, that every one of them was watching him, and that not one of them was on his side.

He spat on the asphalt.

“This isn’t over, Walker.”

“It is for today.”

Strickland turned and walked back toward his men. There was a long, tense moment of shouted argument, of rifles half-raised, of men looking up at the towers and down at the ground. Ethan held his breath.

Then, one by one, they began to back away. They left the useless trucks where they were. They walked back down Route 13 the way they had come, fifty armed men in a loose, angry knot, and disappeared over the crest of the hill.

Luis Ortega let out a long breath and lowered his rifle.

“Think they’re Kane’s?” he asked quietly.

“I don’t know,” Ethan said. “But if they are, now Kane knows we can say no.”

* * *

Ashwood County Fairgrounds — Quarantine Barns

November 15 — 4:30 p.m.

The livestock barns at the east end of the fairgrounds had been built for 4-H cattle shows — long, low wooden buildings with dirt floors, open stalls, and wide sliding doors at each end. By midafternoon they were full.

Noah Simmons had never worked so hard in his life.

His youth group had been at the fairgrounds since nine that morning. Sixty teenagers, hauling straw bales from Hal Whitaker’s barns to line the stalls. Hauling firewood for the fire barrels. Hauling water

from the fairgrounds well in five-gallon buckets. Setting up the long folding tables where Donna Pierce and a crew of church women were ladling out cornmeal mush and bean soup, as thin as they could make it and still call it food. Carrying blankets and coats and sweaters from the collection that Rebecca had organized at First Baptist — coats taken off the backs of people in town who had only two, and gave one.

He was carrying an armful of blankets through the third barn when he heard someone say his name.

“Noah?”

He turned. A small girl was sitting on a straw bale in one of the stalls, wrapped in a pink parka with a torn sleeve. She was maybe seven. Her hair was a tangled brown mess and her face was smudged with dirt, and she was holding a stuffed rabbit that had once been white.

“How do you know my name?” he asked, crouching down beside her.

“The man at the gate called you. When you were carrying the water.” She held out the rabbit. “This is Mr. Buttons. He’s cold.”

Noah looked at the rabbit very seriously. Then he pulled a small fleece blanket from the pile in his arms and wrapped it carefully around Mr. Buttons, tucking in the edges.

“There,” he said. “How’s that?”

The girl examined the rabbit critically. “Better.” She looked up at him. “Are you a Christian?”

Noah blinked. “Yeah. I am.”

“My mommy was a Christian. She went to heaven with Jesus.” The girl said it matter-of-factly, the way she might have said her mother went to the store. “My daddy says she’s never coming back. But she told me that if she ever went to heaven with Jesus, I should find a Christian and ask them about it.” She tilted her head. “So I’m asking you.”

Noah sat down on the straw beside her. His throat had suddenly gone very tight.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Lily.”

“Lily.” He took a breath. “You know what, Lily? My mom and dad went to heaven with Jesus too. On the same day as your mommy.”

Lily’s eyes went wide. “Really?”

“Really. And I was really, really sad. And really mad. For a long time.” He looked down at his hands, cracked and blistered from hauling water. “But then somebody told me that Jesus didn’t take them away to hurt me. He took them to keep them safe. Because something really bad was coming, and He didn’t want them to have to go through it. And He left me here so I’d have a chance to know Him, too. So I could see them again someday.”

“Can I see my mommy again?”

“If you know Jesus, you can.”

Lily considered this seriously. She looked at the rabbit. She looked at Noah.

“How do I know Him?” she asked.

Noah felt his eyes sting.

“You just tell Him,” he said softly. “You tell Him you’re sorry for the bad stuff you’ve done. And you tell Him you believe He died for you and came back to life. And you ask Him to be with you. That’s all. The Bible says, ‘*Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.*’ Whosoever. That means anybody. Even little girls with rabbits.”

“Can Mr. Buttons come too?”

Noah laughed through his tears. “I think Jesus has a soft spot for rabbits.”

So Lily closed her eyes, and folded her small, dirty hands around Mr. Buttons, and prayed, in the straw of a cattle barn at the Ashwood County Fairgrounds, while around her eight hundred exhausted strangers ate bean soup and wrapped themselves in borrowed blankets.

When she was finished, she opened her eyes and looked at Noah.

“Did it work?”

“It worked,” Noah said.

A man was standing at the entrance of the stall. Thin, unshaven, in a filthy Ohio State sweatshirt, with dark circles under his eyes. He had been standing there, Noah realized, for some time.

“Daddy!” Lily held up the rabbit. “Mr. Buttons got a blanket. And I asked Jesus to be with me. Noah showed me how.”

The man looked at his daughter. Then he looked at Noah. His face was working, as though he were trying very hard to hold something in.

“Her mother used to say things like that,” he said hoarsely. “I told her it was nonsense.” He swallowed. “I told her that the day before.”

Noah stood up slowly.

“I told my parents the same thing,” he said. “The day before.”

The two of them looked at each other in silence — a thin, broken man from Mansfield and an eighteen-year-old boy from Ashwood — and in that silence, Noah saw something pass across the man’s face that he recognized, because he had seen it in the mirror six months ago.

Grief. Guilt. And a terrible, fragile, desperate hope.

“My name’s Tom,” the man said finally. “Tom Garrison.” He hesitated. “Do you — do you think we could talk sometime? About… about what you told her?”

“Anytime,” Noah said. “I’ll be here all week.”

* * *

The Quarantine Barns — Isolation Wing

8:40 p.m.

Sarah Collins had examined four hundred and twelve people by the time the sun went down.

She had done it with Megan Torres and three volunteer nurses and a pair of retired veterinarians from Hal Whitaker's church, working by lantern light in the fairgrounds' old exhibition hall, where Ashwood farm wives had once competed for blue ribbons with their pies and quilts. They had checked every throat and every forehead, listened to every chest, looked at every wound, counted every pulse.

By eight o'clock she was so tired that the numbers had started to blur.

She sat on an overturned feed bucket in the isolation barn — the westernmost of the livestock barns, where the sick were being kept — with her clipboard on her knees and her stethoscope around her neck, and read what she had written.

Influenza (confirmed or probable) — 147. Pneumonia — 23. Dysentery — 31. Frostbite requiring treatment — 18. Infected wounds — 12. Severe malnutrition (children) — 44. Pregnant — 9. Critical — 11.

Eleven people who would probably die before morning.

She had three bottles of amoxicillin left. She had one bottle of ciprofloxacin, and most of it had gone into Danny Haskins's leg. She had eleven bags of IV saline and no way to make more that was clean enough to put into a human vein.

She had willow bark tea and chicken broth and boiled water and prayer.

She closed her eyes.

"Doctor Collins?"

She opened them. Isaiah Freeman was standing in the barn doorway, his fedora in his hands, his tall frame silhouetted against the lantern light outside.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," he said. "I just wanted to thank you. For what you've done today." He hesitated. "And to ask if there's anything an old man can do to help."

Sarah looked at him for a moment. Then she laughed — a short, exhausted, slightly hysterical sound.

"Can you make penicillin, Mr. Freeman?"

"No, ma'am. I'm afraid not."

"Then I don't know." She waved a hand at the barn — at the rows of straw-lined stalls, at the dim shapes of the sick huddled under blankets, at the coughing that never, ever stopped. "I've got a hundred and forty-seven people with influenza, and thirty-one with dysentery, and eleven who are probably dying, and I have nothing to give them. *Nothing.* I'm a doctor, Mr. Freeman, and I've been reduced to handing out tea."

The old deacon came into the barn slowly, leaning on his cane, and lowered himself carefully onto a straw bale beside her.

“May I tell you something, Doctor?”

“Please.”

“I was a deacon for thirty-one years,” he said. “Second Calvary Baptist. Sat on the front row every Sunday morning. Sunday night. Wednesday night. Taught the men’s Bible class. Led the prayer meeting. Counted the offering.” He turned his fedora slowly in his hands. “Everybody at that church thought Isaiah Freeman was the most faithful man they’d ever met.” He paused. “And at 3:17 on a spring afternoon, my wife disappeared out of the passenger seat of our Buick on the way home from the grocery store, and I was still sitting behind the wheel.”

Sarah said nothing.

“Thirty-one years,” the old man said softly. “And I never knew Him. I knew *about* Him. I knew every hymn and every verse and every rule. But I never knew Him. My wife did. My pastor did. Half the people in that church did, and they were gone. And I was left sitting in a Buick with a sack of groceries and a heart as empty as a drum.” He shook his head. “It took me three weeks to figure out that I’d spent my whole life playing church. And it took me three more to get down on my knees in my empty kitchen and tell the Lord the truth.”

He looked at her.

“You say you’ve got nothing to give them, Doctor. But you’re wrong. You’ve got more than medicine. You’ve got the only thing they really need.” He nodded toward the rows of sick. “Most of the people in this barn are going to live. God willing. Some of them aren’t. And the ones who aren’t — they don’t need penicillin. They need somebody to sit with them in the dark and tell them there’s a God who loves them, and that dying isn’t the end.” His voice was very gentle. “I spent thirty-one years in church and nobody ever told me that in a way I could hear. Don’t let them die without hearing it.”

Sarah looked down at her clipboard. *Critical — 11.*

She thought of Eleanor Pruitt, smiling at the end. Of Dale Hollis, praying with his lips moving in the isolation ward. Of the surgical nurse across the operating table who had vanished in the middle of an appendectomy, leaving nothing behind but her scrubs and her gloves and a pair of hemostats clattering on the tile.

“*Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*”

“Will you help me?” she asked quietly.

Isaiah Freeman smiled and pushed himself slowly to his feet.

“Doctor,” he said, “that’s what I came here for.”

* * *

The South Gate Watchtower

11:55 p.m.

The last fire barrels at the fairgrounds were burning low when Ethan climbed back up the ladder to the watchtower. Luis Ortega was still there, wrapped in a wool blanket, his scoped rifle across his knees.

“Quiet?” Ethan asked.

“Quiet.” Ortega nodded south. “No sign of Strickland. No sign of anybody. Just the road.”

Ethan stood at the rail and looked down the long, empty ribbon of Route 13, silver-gray under the stars. That morning it had been full of people. Now there was nothing on it but two abandoned pickup trucks, a broken shopping cart, and a child’s pink sneaker lying on the center line.

“Rachel talked to about a hundred of them this afternoon,” he said. “She’s writing it all down. Every name. Everyone who died on the road. Everyone who saw the men with the Iron Ridge patches.” He paused. “She’s also talked to a dozen people who say that before Kane’s men came, there was another man at the Ontario camp. A man with a satellite phone and a box of forms. He said anyone who registered would get priority for the relief convoys in the spring. About half the camp signed up.”

Ortega looked at him. “And the other half?”

“The other half got burned out a week later.” Ethan’s voice was very quiet. “Rachel says every single person she talked to who refused to register was in this column. And almost everyone who registered stayed behind. Kane’s men left their tents alone.”

Ortega was silent for a long time.

“That’s not a coincidence,” he said finally.

“No,” Ethan said. “I don’t think it is.”

Below them, from the fairgrounds, the sound of singing drifted up faintly on the cold night air. Not many voices. Just a few, somewhere in the isolation barn, low and rough and tired. Ethan recognized the tune. An old spiritual that his grandmother used to sing on her front porch when he was a boy.

“*There is a balm in Gilead, To make the wounded whole; There is a balm in Gilead, To heal the sin-sick soul…*”

He could pick out one voice above the others — deep and rich and cracked with age. Isaiah Freeman, singing to the dying.

And beneath it, softer, a woman’s voice. Clear and a little uncertain, as though she were singing a song she had only just learned.

Sarah.

Ethan stood at the rail with his hands on the cold wood and listened until the song was finished.

Then Ortega’s radio crackled.

“*Clinic to Walker.*” It was Megan Torres, her voice thin and frightened. “*Commander, are you there?*”

Ethan keyed his radio. “Go ahead, Megan.”

“*Dr. Collins asked me to call you. She’s still at the fairgrounds.*” A pause. “*We’ve got three new cases of influenza at the clinic tonight. Not refugees. Ours. Walt Kimble’s wife, Martha. A girl from Noah’s youth group who was hauling water at the barns this morning. And one of the volunteers from the south gate.*”

Ethan closed his eyes.

“*Dr. Collins says it’s in town now,*” Megan said. “*She says to tell you — she says it’s started.*”

Ethan lowered the radio slowly.

Far to the south, beyond the last dark fields, the road stretched away empty toward Mansfield and Iron Ridge and all the ruined country in between. Behind him, in the barns, eight hundred and forty-three strangers slept on straw under borrowed blankets — fed, sheltered, and alive, for tonight.

And somewhere in the dark, invisible and silent, the enemy that no wall could stop had already come through the gate.

“*Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day; nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday.*”

— Psalm 91:5–6

* * *

END OF CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 6

The Silent Enemy

“*He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds.*”

— Psalm 147:3

* * *

Ashwood County Fairgrounds — Isolation Barns

November 18 — 5:10 a.m.

The dead were carried out before dawn.

Sarah Collins had made that rule on the second night, and she had not broken it since. The sick did not need to wake up and see the empty stalls beside them. They did not need to watch the stretchers go past. So every morning, while it was still dark, Noah Simmons and four boys from his youth group came to the isolation barns with two canvas stretchers and a lantern, and moved quietly down the rows, and Sarah pointed, and they did what needed to be done.

This morning she pointed six times.

A seventy-one-year-old man from Shelby who had walked a hundred miles pushing his wife in a wheelchair, and then died two days after she did. A woman from Crestline whose pneumonia had filled both lungs. Twin boys, eleven months old, who had come through the gate with dysentery and never stopped losing fluid no matter how much Sarah spooned into them. A young man from Galion who had seemed to be recovering yesterday afternoon and was simply gone by midnight, his heart giving out under a fever of a hundred and six.

And a girl from Noah's youth group.

Her name was Kelsey Dunn. She was sixteen. She had hauled water at the fairgrounds on the first morning, laughing and splashing the other kids with the bucket, and she had come down with a fever that night. Her parents had vanished in April. She had been living with her grandmother on Locust Street. She had been one of the first teenagers to walk into Noah's Bible study in June, and she had sat in the front row every week since, taking notes in a spiral notebook with purple ink.

Noah stood beside her cot for a long time with the stretcher handles in his hands and did not move.

Sarah put her hand on his shoulder.

"You don't have to do this one," she said quietly. "One of the other boys can."

Noah shook his head. His face was wet.

"She'd want it to be me," he said.

So he did it. He and a boy named Marcus Webb lifted her gently onto the stretcher and covered her with a quilt, and carried her out through the wide sliding doors into the cold blue darkness, toward the wagon that would take her up to Hillside.

Sarah watched them go. Then she turned back to the rows of cots and stalls and straw bales, and the coughing that never stopped, and she began her rounds.

* * *

By the fourth day, the numbers had stopped meaning anything.

Sarah still wrote them down. She had to. Every morning, sitting on an overturned feed bucket with a pencil stub and the clipboard on her knees, she counted.

Influenza — 211 (refugees 164, town 47). Pneumonia — 38. Dysentery — 52. Infected wounds — 14. Critical — 19. Deaths since Nov. 15 — 22.

She wrote them down, and she looked at them, and they were just marks on a page. Twenty-two was a number. Kelsey Dunn was a girl with purple ink. The two things refused to fit together in her mind.

She had turned the high school gymnasium into a second isolation ward on the sixteenth, when the first cases in town began to multiply. The fairgrounds held the refugees. The gym held Ashwood. Megan Torres ran the gym. Sarah ran the barns. They met at the halfway point every evening, on the corner of Route 13 and Fairview Road, and exchanged numbers in the dark like spies.

The medicine was almost gone.

Three bottles of amoxicillin had become two, then one. She gave it only to the pneumonia cases most likely to survive with it and most likely to die without it — a calculation she made a dozen times a day, standing over cots with her stethoscope in her ears, and hated herself for every time. The ciprofloxacin was gone. The morphine was down to two vials, saved for the worst of the dying. The IV saline was down to four bags.

Everything else was water and salt and willow bark and prayer.

On the fourth night, she did not go home at all. She slept for two hours on a straw bale in the corner of the third barn, with her coat over her and her stethoscope still around her neck, and woke to find that someone had covered her with a second blanket and left a cup of chicory on the ground beside her, still warm.

She never found out who.

* * *

Fairgrounds Well House

November 19 — 10:30 a.m.

“It’s the water,” Rachel Monroe said.

Sarah looked up from the cot where she was listening to a little boy’s chest. Rachel was standing at the end of the row in her borrowed cardigan, with a spiral notebook in one hand and a pencil behind her ear. She had been at the fairgrounds every day since the refugees came — interviewing them, writing down names, recording every death and every story. She said it was what she was good at. Sarah suspected it was also the only way Rachel knew how to be useful without having to touch anyone.

“The dysentery,” Rachel said. “It’s the water. I’ve been mapping it.”

Sarah handed the little boy back to his mother and followed Rachel outside.

It was a gray, raw morning, with a thin wind blowing out of the northwest and sleet ticking against the metal roofs of the barns. Rachel led her past the long row of livestock barns to the fairgrounds well house — a small cinderblock building with a hand pump that had been installed to replace the electric one in June. A line of refugees stood outside it with buckets and jugs, waiting their turn.

Rachel opened her notebook.

“I’ve been asking every dysentery patient where they got their water, which barn they sleep in, where they use the latrine,” she said. “I thought maybe it was coming from outside — from the road, from Ontario. But it’s not.” She pointed at a hand-drawn map in the notebook. “The first cases were scattered. People who brought it with them. But the new cases — the ones who got sick *here* — almost all of them are in Barns Two and Three. And almost all of them have been drinking from this well.”

Sarah stared at the map. Then she looked at the well house. Then she turned slowly and looked forty yards downhill, where the long trench latrines had been dug on the first day behind a row of plywood screens.

Downhill.

No. *Uphill.*

She had been so exhausted on the fifteenth, so buried in triage and fever and dying children, that she had never walked the ground herself. She had told Jack's volunteers to dig latrines well away from the barns, and they had. They had dug them on the high ground behind the grandstand, where the soil was easy to dig and the wind would carry the smell away.

Forty yards uphill from the well.

"The rain," Sarah said slowly. "It rained on the sixteenth. And the seventeenth. Everything from the latrines has been running straight down into the groundwater."

Rachel nodded grimly.

"How did I miss it?" Sarah pressed her hands against her face. "How did I *miss* that? It's the most basic public health principle in the world. John Snow and the Broad Street pump — 1854. They teach it the first week of medical school." Her voice cracked. "I killed those twin boys. I killed them because I was too tired to walk up a hill."

"No," Rachel said sharply. "You didn't. You've been awake for four days trying to keep eight hundred people alive with a stethoscope and a bottle of aspirin. The volunteers who dug those latrines were insurance salesmen and schoolteachers. Nobody in this town has ever built a refugee camp before." She closed the notebook. "The latrines killed those babies. Kane killed those babies, when he burned Ontario and drove them here. Not you."

Sarah looked at her, startled. It was the most emotion she had ever heard in Rachel Monroe's voice.

"Why do you care?" she asked, before she could stop herself.

Rachel was silent for a moment. The sleet ticked against the well house roof.

"Because I've spent six months carrying a box full of paper that proves the people running this world don't care about any of them," she said finally. "And I'm tired of being the only one who does." She shook her head. "And because Samuel Graves has been making me read the Gospel of Mark, and there's a part in it where Jesus sees a crowd of people and He has compassion on them, because they're like sheep without a shepherd." She looked away. "I keep thinking about that. I don't know why."

Sarah didn't say anything. She reached over and squeezed Rachel's hand, briefly. Rachel let her.

Then Sarah turned to the line of refugees at the pump.

"Nobody drinks from this well," she called out. "Not one more cup. Not until I say so."

* * *

By nightfall, it was done.

Hal Whitaker brought fifty volunteers and a team of Belgian draft horses. They filled in the old latrines with lime from the co-op and dirt from the infield, and dug new ones three hundred yards away, downhill, beyond the old racetrack, lined with gravel and covered with plank floors. Noah's youth group hauled water from the town's treatment plant in a pair of old milk tankers towed by horses, and

every drop of it was boiled at the fairgrounds before anyone drank it. Jack's volunteers posted a guard on the fairgrounds well with a hand-lettered sign:

DO NOT DRINK — CONTAMINATED — BY ORDER OF DR. COLLINS

And Sarah, standing in the fairgrounds kitchen with Samuel Graves and Donna Pierce and a crew of church women around a row of steaming stockpots, taught them how to make the only medicine she had left in abundance.

"One liter of clean, boiled water," she said, holding up a quart mason jar filled nearly to the brim. "Six level teaspoons of sugar. Half a level teaspoon of salt. That's all. Stir it until it dissolves." She measured as she spoke, her hands moving with the careful precision of a surgeon. "It's called oral rehydration solution. It's saved more lives than any drug in human history. More than penicillin. More than vaccines. The World Health Organization used to estimate it saved a million children a year." She held up the jar. "Dysentery doesn't kill you by itself. The dehydration kills you. If we can keep fluid in them faster than it goes out, most of them will live."

"Sugar," Donna Pierce said. "We ran out of sugar in August."

Sarah had known that. She had been dreading it all afternoon.

"Honey works," Samuel said. "Or molasses. Near enough."

"Do we have honey?"

The old farmer thought about it. "Hal's got a few jars. I've got a few. Not enough." He paused. "But I know who does."

* * *

The Mennonites of Pike's Mill came the next morning.

They came in three black buggies and a flatbed wagon, down the long gravel lane from County Road 7, and they came to the north gate instead of the south, because the south road ran past Kane's Grange hall and Bishop Jacob Brenneman said it was best not to tempt a man who was already tempted enough.

The wagon was loaded with wooden crates. In the crates were jars — hundreds of them — of golden clover honey and dark sorghum molasses, packed in straw.

"We keep bees," the old bishop said simply, climbing stiffly down from the lead buggy while Ethan and Samuel Graves stared at the wagon. "Three hundred hives. We have always kept bees. My grandfather said, *When the world forgets how to make sugar, the bees will still remember*." His pale blue eyes twinkled faintly. "He was a wise man, my grandfather. He also said the English would one day need us. We did not believe him."

"Bishop," Ethan said slowly, "Kane claims your valley. He's taking thirty percent of everything you grow. If he finds out you did this —"

"Then he will be angry." Brenneman nodded calmly. "I have told Mr. Kane that we will render unto Caesar. I did not tell him we would stop rendering unto God." He gestured at the crates. "This is not

Caesar's honey. This is the Lord's. And the Lord says, '*Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness… Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house?*'" He looked toward the fairgrounds, where the smoke of the cooking fires rose above the barns. "Isaiah fifty-eight. We heard that you have taken in the people from Ontario. We heard that children are dying of the flux." He shook his head slowly. "We could not sit in our valley and eat honey while children died a few miles away. That is not the way of our people."

Samuel Graves took the old man's hand in both of his and held it for a long time.

"God bless you, Jacob," he said hoarsely.

"He already has, Samuel," the bishop said. "That is why we have honey to give."

* * *

Ashwood High School — Surgical Stage

November 22 — 2:15 p.m.

Danny Haskins's leg had been healing perfectly.

For eighteen days, the wound in his thigh had stayed clean and pink and dry. Sarah had checked it every morning. Carl had come down from Millbrook every other day to sit beside his nephew's cot, bringing him apples and a deck of cards and gossip from home. Danny had started walking with crutches. He had started talking about going home for Christmas.

On the morning of the twentieth, he woke up with a fever.

By the twenty-first, the skin around the wound had turned an angry, shiny red, streaked with lines that crept upward toward his hip. By the morning of the twenty-second, the wound itself had opened, weeping thick yellow pus that smelled of rot, and Danny Haskins lay on his cot in the gymnasium with his eyes glassy and his lips cracked and his heart racing at a hundred and forty beats a minute.

Cellulitis. Abscess. And beneath it, maybe, something worse — the beginning of the kind of deep infection that crept along muscle and bone and did not stop until it reached the blood.

Sarah stood over him with her hands on her hips and her jaw clenched and knew exactly what the textbook said to do.

IV vancomycin. Surgical debridement. Culture and sensitivity. Consider hyperbaric oxygen.

She had none of it.

She had one bottle of amoxicillin, half full. Amoxicillin was the wrong drug for this. It would barely touch it.

"What are my options?" she said out loud, to no one.

"Amputation," said a voice behind her.

She turned. Doc Lindquist was standing at the edge of the stage, a tall, stooped, white-haired man in a flannel shirt and suspenders. He had been the large-animal veterinarian for Ashwood County for forty-

four years. Since the refugees came, he and his old partner, Doc Hartman, had been working in the barns beside Sarah, treating wounds and setting bones and delivering babies with the same calm, practical hands they had used on cattle and horses for half a century.

“Above the knee,” Lindquist said. “Before it spreads. That’s what they’d have done at Gettysburg.” He shrugged. “It’s what I’d do on a horse. But he isn’t a horse, and I suspect you’d like to save the leg.”

“I’d like to save the *boy*,” Sarah said. “Without antibiotics, an amputation this high — with infection already in the tissue — he could get sepsis from the surgery itself.” She pressed her fingers against her temples. “I don’t know what to do, Doc. I honestly don’t know.”

Lindquist was quiet for a moment. Then he climbed the three steps onto the stage and bent over the cot, examining the wound with a practiced eye.

“You know what we used to do,” he said slowly, “back before the drug companies sold us a pill for everything? When I was a young man, apprenticing with old Doc Farris out on the county line?” He straightened. “Honey.”

Sarah stared at him.

“I’m serious. Raw honey. Packed right into the wound.” The old vet nodded. “It’s been used on wounds for five thousand years. The Egyptians did it. The Greeks. The Union Army. Honey’s so thick with sugar that bacteria can’t live in it — it pulls the water right out of them. And it makes a little hydrogen peroxide when it touches the tissue. There were studies, back in the nineties and two-thousands. Hospitals in Germany and New Zealand were using medical-grade honey on burns and ulcers that wouldn’t heal. Worked better than a lot of antibiotic creams.” He paused. “The Mennonites just brought you three hundred jars.”

Sarah looked down at Danny’s wound. She remembered, dimly, a lecture in her third year. A slide showing a diabetic foot ulcer before and after honey dressings. She had written it off at the time as folk medicine. A curiosity.

“We’d have to debride it first,” she said slowly. “Cut away all the dead tissue. Open it up. Drain the abscess. Then pack it with honey and change the dressings twice a day.”

“Three times, if you can,” Lindquist said. “And I’ll tell you something else you won’t like.”

“What?”

“If the debridement isn’t clean enough — if there’s dead tissue down deep where you can’t get it with a scalpel —” The old vet hesitated. “Maggots.”

Sarah stared at him.

“Green bottle fly larvae,” Lindquist said matter-of-factly. “They only eat dead tissue. They won’t touch the living. They were used in every hospital in America until penicillin came along. The Civil War surgeons noticed that the wounds with maggots in them healed better than the ones without. The FDA actually approved them again as a medical device back in 2004.” He shrugged. “I don’t have any green bottle flies in November. But if we have to, I know a man who keeps a colony for his trout fishing.”

For a long moment, Sarah said nothing.

Then she started to laugh. It came out ragged and a little hysterical, and she pressed the back of her wrist against her mouth to stop it.

“I went to Johns Hopkins,” she said. “I did my residency at Ohio State. I’ve read every issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine* for six years. And I’m about to treat a septic wound with honey from Mennonite beehives and maggots from a trout fisherman.”

“Welcome to 1861, Doctor.” Lindquist smiled faintly. “The Lord gives us what we need. It just doesn’t always come in a bottle.”

Sarah wiped her eyes. She looked down at Danny Haskins, burning with fever on his cot. Then she looked across the gymnasium at the bleachers, where Carl Haskins was sitting with his big hands clasped and his head bowed.

She walked over to him.

Carl looked up. His face was gray.

“He’s going to lose the leg, isn’t he?” he said hoarsely.

“Maybe,” Sarah said. “Maybe not. I’m going to try something, Carl. It’s going to sound crazy. It’s going to look worse before it gets better. And I need you to trust me.”

Carl looked at her for a long moment. Then he nodded slowly.

“You saved his life once,” he said. “I trust you.”

* * *

The debridement took two hours.

Sarah worked with Doc Lindquist and Megan Torres beneath the car headlamps, cutting away the dead and blackened tissue layer by layer until she reached clean, bleeding muscle. She drained a pocket of pus the size of a hen’s egg. She irrigated the wound with boiled salt water until it ran clear. Then she packed it — gently, carefully, the way she would have packed a surgical wound in the operating room at Mercy General — with thick golden clover honey from Pike’s Mill, and covered it with boiled gauze and a clean cotton bandage.

She gave Danny the last of the ketamine for the procedure. When he woke up, groggy and crying, she sat beside him and held his hand.

“Is it gone?” he whispered. “My leg?”

“It’s still there,” she said. “We’re going to fight for it.”

“Uncle Carl says you pray.”

Sarah was quiet for a moment. “I do.”

“Would you — would you pray for it? For my leg?” His eyes filled with tears. “I want to play baseball again. I was going to try out for varsity in the spring. Before everything.”

Sarah looked down at the boy's hand in hers. It was burning with fever.

She had prayed over patients before. Always silently. Always privately, in her own head, while her hands did the work. She had never prayed out loud over a patient in her life.

She bowed her head.

"Lord," she said quietly. "This is Danny. You know him. You made him. You know every cell in this leg and every bacteria in that wound. I've done everything I know how to do, and it isn't enough. It's never enough. But You are. '*I am the LORD that healeth thee.*' That's what You told Your people in the wilderness, when they didn't have a doctor or a hospital or anything but You." Her voice caught. "So I'm asking You to heal him. Not because I deserve it. Not because he does. Because You're good. And because he wants to play baseball in the spring. In Jesus' name. Amen."

"Amen," Danny whispered.

On the bleachers, Carl Haskins had his face in his hands.

* * *

Kimble Residence, Chestnut Street

November 25 — 3:20 a.m.

Martha Kimble died a little after three in the morning, in her own bed, in the house where she had lived for fifty-two years.

Sarah was with her. So was Walt. So was Rebecca Whitfield, who had sat with Martha every evening for a week, reading her the Psalms in the lamplight while the old woman's breathing grew slower and harder and wetter, and the influenza turned into pneumonia, and the pneumonia filled her lungs.

There had been no amoxicillin to give her. Sarah had made that decision on the twenty-first, standing in the Kimbles' bedroom with the last half bottle in her coat pocket and a feverish refugee child waiting in the barns. Martha was seventy-eight, with a weak heart and emphysema from forty years of smoking. The child was six.

Sarah had given it to the child.

The child had lived.

Walt Kimble had not said a word about it. He had simply nodded, when Sarah told him, and put his big, thin hand on her shoulder, and said, *You did right, Doc. Martha'd have done the same.*

Now he sat on the edge of the bed with his wife's hand in his and did not move.

At the end, Martha had been awake for a few minutes. Just a few. She had opened her eyes and looked at her husband, and then past him, at something none of them could see, and she had smiled.

And then — so faintly that Sarah had to lean close to hear — she had begun to sing.

"*It is well… with my soul…*"

She did not finish the line.

Rebecca finished it for her, softly, through her tears. "*It is well, it is well with my soul.*"

Walt Kimble bowed his head over his wife's hand and wept.

* * *

They buried her on Hillside that afternoon, in one of the graves Noah's boys had dug in October, before the ground froze.

It was bitterly cold. Snow had come in the night and lay an inch deep across the cemetery, and a hard wind came across the hilltop out of the northwest and set the bare oak branches rattling. Two hundred people stood in the snow around the grave. Most of them had known Martha Kimble all their lives — had sat in her Sunday school class, or bought pies from her at the church bake sale, or been scolded by her for running in the library where she had volunteered every Tuesday for thirty years.

Many of them had stood in First Baptist Church on the night of the town meeting and heard her begin the hymn that had held the whole town together.

Samuel Graves read the service from the old *Book of Common Prayer* he had found in his wife's nightstand. His voice carried in the frozen air.

"*I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.*"

When he was finished, Walt Kimble stepped forward to the edge of the grave. He was wearing his old hunting coat and a borrowed tie, and he was holding his hat in both hands. For a long moment, he just stood there, looking down at the plain pine box.

"Fifty-eight years," he said at last. His voice was thick. "We got married in that church down there when I was twenty-one and she was nineteen. Her daddy didn't like me. Said I'd never amount to anything." A faint, cracked smile. "He was right, mostly. But she stayed with me anyway." He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "She went to church every Sunday for fifty-eight years. I went on Christmas and Easter, and I complained the whole way. She never once nagged me about it. She just prayed. Every night. Right next to me in bed. I'd pretend to be asleep."

He looked down at the coffin.

"When everybody disappeared in April," he said, "I thought she'd be gone too. I came running home from the hardware store, and I was sure I'd find her clothes on the kitchen floor." He shook his head slowly. "But she was sitting at the table. Crying. And she looked at me and said, *Walter, I wasn't ready. All those years in church, and I was never really ready. I knew about Him, but I never let Him have me.*" His voice broke. "Forty years of pretending to be asleep, and she'd been pretending too. Just a different way."

The crowd was utterly silent.

"She got right with God that night," Walt said. "Down on her knees on the kitchen linoleum. And she dragged me down there with her." He almost laughed. "Seventy-nine years old, and I finally got saved on my kitchen floor because my wife wouldn't let go of my hand."

He put his hat back on.

“She was ready this time,” he said quietly. “And she wasn’t afraid. Not even a little. She smiled at the end. You all should know that. She smiled.” He looked down one more time. “Goodbye, Martha. I’ll see you soon. Don’t let anybody take my chair.”

He stepped back.

Noah Simmons and five boys from his youth group lowered the pine box into the frozen ground. And as the first shovelful of earth fell, someone at the back of the crowd — Ethan never knew who — began to sing.

“*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way…*”

And the whole hillside sang with them, in the snow and the wind, over the grave of the woman who had taught them the song.

* * *

That evening, the radio in the courthouse command center crackled to life at the usual hour, and the voice came out of the static — calm, warm, and reassuring, as it always was.

Ethan sat at the long walnut table and listened with Jack, Mercer, Rachel, and Mayor Brooks. None of them spoke.

“*…and so tonight I am proud to announce the launch of the Global Health Initiative, in partnership with the medical authorities of forty-one nations. Beginning next week, the first shipments of antibiotics, antiviral medications, insulin, and vaccines will be delivered by air to registered regional authorities across North America. No community that has chosen cooperation will be left to suffer alone this winter. I say to every mother whose child is sick, to every doctor who has run out of medicine: help is coming. You need only reach out your hand.*”

Ethan reached over and turned it off.

For a long time, nobody said anything.

“*Registered* regional authorities,” Rachel said finally. Her voice was very quiet.

“By air,” Mercer said. “Not in the spring. *Next week.*” He shook his head slowly. “They held it back. They’ve had it all along, and they held it back, until the fear got deep enough.”

Mayor Brooks said nothing at all. He sat at the end of the table with his hands folded in front of him, staring at the silent radio.

Ethan knew he was thinking about Ellen.

And about the vote.

Insulin.

* * *

Ashwood High School — Community Clinic

November 28 — 11:40 p.m.

Sarah collapsed on the twenty-eighth.

She had known for two days that it was coming. The headache that would not leave. The ache in her joints and the small of her back. The chills that she told herself were just the cold, and the exhaustion, and too many nights on straw bales. She had kept working. There was no one else.

On the evening of the twenty-eighth, she was bending over a cot in the gymnasium, listening to a refugee woman's chest, when the floor tilted sideways beneath her and the lanterns spun, and the last thing she remembered was the cool, smooth hardwood of the basketball court against her cheek, and Megan Torres screaming her name.

* * *

She dreamed.

She dreamed of the operating room at Mercy General, bright and cold, the monitors beeping, the anesthesia machine hissing. She was standing over an open abdomen with a scalpel in her hand, and the surgical nurse across the table — Linda Castellano, twenty-six years a nurse, who used to hum hymns under her breath during long procedures — was looking up at her over her mask.

Linda, she said. *Linda, I can't do this anymore. I don't have anything left. They keep dying.*

And Linda smiled at her, the way she had smiled a thousand times across a thousand tables, and said, *You were never supposed to do it alone, Sarah. That was always the problem.*

Then the light came, and Linda was gone, and there was nothing on the floor but a pair of scrubs and a clattering pair of hemostats.

And Sarah was standing alone in the white light, and she was so tired.

"*Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*"

The voice was not Linda's. It was not anyone's she knew. And yet she knew it. She had heard it in the pages of a dead pastor's Bible, sitting in a car in a church parking lot, reading by flashlight while the town burned.

"*Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.*"

She wept in the dream. She did not know why.

* * *

When she opened her eyes, it was daylight.

She was lying on a cot in the corner of the old wrestling room behind the bleachers, where the pots of water boiled around the clock. Someone had hung a sheet across the doorway for privacy. The room was warm and smelled of woodsmoke and honey. Her head felt like it was packed with wet cotton, and her whole body ached as though she had been beaten, but her mind was clear.

Ethan Walker was sitting in a folding chair beside her cot.

He was asleep. His head had fallen forward onto his chest, and his arms were folded, and Emily's Bible was open on his knee, its pages stirring slightly in the warm air from the stove. He had not shaved in several days. He looked terrible.

Sarah watched him for a long moment without moving.

Then she said, "How long?"

His head came up with a jerk. He blinked at her. Then something moved across his face — relief so naked and so deep that Sarah had to look away from it.

"Three days," he said. His voice was rough. "You've been out three days. Fever of a hundred and five the first night. Megan thought —" He stopped. "We didn't know."

"The clinic?"

"Megan's running it. Doc Lindquist and Doc Hartman are running the barns. Isaiah Freeman's been sitting with the dying every night. Rebecca and Samuel have been taking shifts." He paused. "Rachel's been in charge of the water. She's got a whole system. Nobody's gotten dysentery in the barns in five days."

Sarah closed her eyes.

"The numbers," she said. "Tell me the numbers."

Ethan hesitated. Then he pulled a folded piece of paper from his shirt pocket. Megan's handwriting.

"Ninety-seven dead since the fifteenth," he said quietly. "Forty-one from town. Fifty-six from the barns."

Sarah did not move.

"But Megan says it's turning," Ethan went on. "New cases are down by half since Thanksgiving. The dysentery's almost gone. The fever's burning itself out. Doc Lindquist says it's the same way it goes with cattle — it runs through the herd, and then it's done." He looked down at the paper. "She says maybe another week. Maybe two. And then it's over."

"Ninety-seven," Sarah whispered.

"Ninety-seven," Ethan said. "And about six hundred and fifty who got sick and lived. Most of them because of you."

Sarah turned her face toward the wall.

"Danny?" she asked.

"Fever broke two days ago." For the first time, a faint smile crossed Ethan's face. "The honey worked. Doc Lindquist says the wound's pink and clean. Carl sat on those bleachers for three straight days. When Danny's fever broke, he walked outside and I found him kneeling in the snow behind the gym."

He shook his head. “Carl Haskins. On his knees. I’ve known him thirty years and I never saw him pray.”

Sarah laughed weakly, and it turned into a cough, and Ethan handed her a cup of water. Boiled. With honey in it.

She drank it slowly.

“I had a dream,” she said when she was finished. “About the nurse who disappeared during my surgery. Linda.” She stared up at the ceiling. “She told me I was never supposed to do it alone.”

Ethan was quiet for a long moment.

“She was right,” he said. “You weren’t. None of us were.”

He looked down at Emily’s Bible, open on his knee.

“I’ve been reading to you,” he said, a little awkwardly. “While you were out. I didn’t know what else to do. I read you some of the Psalms. And the Gospels. And Second Corinthians — Emily had a lot of things underlined in Second Corinthians.” He turned a few pages and found a verse marked in pink highlighter. “There’s one she underlined twice. I read it to you about fifty times. I don’t know if you heard it.”

“Read it again,” Sarah said.

He read it.

“*And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*”

Sarah closed her eyes. Tears slid out from under her lashes and ran down into her hair.

“I heard it,” she whispered.

* * *

The Courthouse

December 2 — 10:15 a.m.

Carl Haskins came to Ashwood alone on the morning of the second of December, driving a Millbrook pickup with a white flag on the antenna and a single wooden crate in the bed.

He found Ethan in the commissioners’ chamber and set the crate down on the walnut table without a word.

It was a sturdy thing, made of pale pine, stenciled on every side in crisp black letters: **GLOBAL HEALTH INITIATIVE — PRIORITY MEDICAL SUPPLIES — FOR REGISTERED AUTHORITIES ONLY.** And on the lid, stamped in blue ink, a seal: a stylized globe encircled by twelve interlocking rings.

Ethan looked at it for a long time.

“The planes came to Millbrook three days ago,” Carl said quietly. “Two of them. Big gray cargo planes with no markings. Came in low over the Johnson farm and dropped forty pallets by parachute. Antibiotics. Insulin. Flu medicine. IV bags. Bandages. Enough to last the whole Compact till spring.” He paused. “There was a man with them. Same one who brought the forms. Very polite. He checked every name on the Compact’s registration list against a computer on a satellite link, and then he handed out the medicine one household at a time.”

“And the ones who didn’t register?”

Carl looked down at the table.

“There were about forty families in Millbrook who wouldn’t sign,” he said. “Mostly church people. A few old-timers who remembered the Cold War. They didn’t get anything.” His jaw tightened. “The man said it was nothing personal. He said the Initiative couldn’t verify their need without a completed form. He said they were welcome to register at any time.”

Ethan said nothing.

“I stole this,” Carl said. “Out of the depot. Last night. Took it right off the pallet and put it in my truck.” He pushed the crate across the table toward Ethan. “Amoxicillin. Cipro. Doxycycline. Tamiflu. Twelve vials of insulin. Some other things — I don’t know what half of it is. Your doctor will.” He looked up. “It’s for Danny. For what your people did for him. For what she did.”

Ethan looked at the crate. At the seal on the lid.

“Carl,” he said slowly. “If they find out you took this —”

“Ray Talbot’ll have me hung from the Millbrook water tower.” Carl shrugged his enormous shoulders. “I figure I owed you one.”

“You don’t owe me anything.”

“Yeah, I do.” Carl’s voice was rough. “You walked out into the middle of County Road 12 with your hands empty. You put your belt on my nephew’s leg. Your doctor saved his life twice. And I was standing on the other side of that road with a rifle, getting ready to take your fuel.” He shook his head. “I owe you, Ethan. And I’m tired of owing people I’m supposed to be fighting.”

He turned toward the door. Then he stopped.

“Something else,” he said, without turning around. “When I was on my knees behind your gym the other day — when Danny’s fever broke —” He hesitated. “I didn’t know what to say. I never learned how to pray. So I just said *thank You.* Over and over. Like an idiot.” His voice was barely audible. “Is that — does that count?”

Ethan swallowed hard.

“Carl,” he said, “I think that’s the best prayer there is.”

Carl Haskins nodded slowly. Then he walked out.

* * *

An hour later, Sarah Collins — still pale, still weak, leaning on a cane borrowed from Samuel Graves — stood in the commissioners' chamber and looked at the open crate.

Inside, packed in foam, were rows of neat white boxes, every one stamped with the same blue seal. Amoxicillin. Ciprofloxacin. Doxycycline. Oseltamivir. Twelve vials of insulin in a small insulated cooler.

Enough to save dozens of lives. Maybe more.

She did not touch it.

"I don't know if I should use it," she said quietly.

Rebecca, Samuel, Ethan, and Mayor Brooks stood around the table with her. Nobody answered at first.

"It came from *them*," Sarah said. "From the Initiative. From the people who wrote Rachel's documents. From the people who burned Ontario, maybe." She looked at the seal. "We voted not to take their help. We voted not to put our names on their list. And now it's sitting on the table in front of me, and I want it so badly my hands are shaking." She looked up. "Isn't this the same thing? Isn't this exactly what we said no to?"

It was Samuel Graves who answered.

The old farmer lowered himself into a chair with a grunt and rested both gnarled hands on the head of his cane.

"There was a problem in the church at Corinth," he said slowly. "Back in the Bible days. All the meat they sold in the market had been offered to idols first — sacrificed at the pagan temples, then sold off to the butchers. And the Christians there got themselves all tied up in knots about it. Some of them said, *We can't eat that. It's been dedicated to false gods. If we eat it, we're worshiping idols.*" He looked at Sarah. "And Paul wrote them a letter. You know what he said?"

Sarah shook her head.

"He said, '*Whatsoever is sold in the shambles, that eat, asking no question for conscience sake: For the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof.*'" Samuel smiled faintly. "The earth is the Lord's, Sarah. All of it. Every pill in that box was made from chemicals that God put in the ground, by people God gave minds to, and it came to you by way of a man who stole it because he loved his nephew and was grateful to you." He tapped the crate with his cane. "The sin wasn't eating the meat. The sin was bowing to the idol. And you didn't bow. You didn't sign anything. You didn't put your name in their book. The only thing you did was save a boy's leg with honey and pray."

Sarah looked at the crate for a long time.

"And if they use it against us later?" she asked. "If they say, *See, even Ashwood took our medicine?*"

"Then let them say it." Samuel shrugged. "Jesus ate with tax collectors, and the Pharisees said all sorts of things about Him. He didn't seem too worried." His eyes twinkled. "Use the medicine, Doctor. Save the children. And when the man with the satellite phone comes knocking, tell him the Lord provided — and He used a stolen box from Millbrook to do it."

For a moment, no one spoke.

Then Daniel Brooks stepped forward and, very gently, lifted the small insulated cooler out of the crate. He held it in both hands, as though it were made of glass. His eyes were wet behind his wire-rimmed glasses.

“Twelve vials,” he said hoarsely.

“Twelve vials,” Sarah said. “With what we have left, and careful rationing — that gets everybody through March. Maybe April.”

Brooks closed his eyes.

“‘*Before they call, I will answer,*’” he whispered. “Isaiah sixty-five. My mother’s favorite.” He laughed brokenly. “Forty years I haven’t thought about it. Three times this week.”

Rebecca put her hand on his arm.

Sarah Collins reached into the crate and lifted out the first white box of amoxicillin. She turned it over in her hands and looked at the blue seal stamped on the side — the globe and the twelve interlocking rings.

Then she set it down, picked up a black grease pencil from the table, and drew a small, careful cross over the seal.

“There,” she said quietly. “Now it’s ours.”

She took her cane and the first two boxes and walked slowly out of the room, toward the stairs, toward the clinic and the barns and the long rows of cots where the sick were waiting.

Ethan watched her go.

Outside the tall windows, the sun had broken through the clouds for the first time in a week, and the snow on the courthouse square was blazing white. Down on Hillside, beyond the edge of town, he could see the long raw rows of new graves — ninety-seven of them, dark against the snow. And beyond them, in the fairgrounds, the smoke of the cooking fires rising straight up into the still, cold air, from barns where six hundred and fifty people who should have died were still alive.

The silent enemy had come through the gate.

It had taken ninety-seven of them.

But it had not taken Ashwood.

“*Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits: Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies.*”

— Psalm 103:2–4

* * *

END OF CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 7

The Shepherd’s Legacy

“*And he being dead yet speaketh.*”

— Hebrews 11:4

* * *

First Baptist Church — The Bell Tower

December 8 — 9:40 a.m.

The bell tower of First Baptist Church had not been opened in eleven years.

Jack Reynolds wanted it opened now.

“Highest point on the east side of town,” he said, standing at the bottom of the narrow wooden ladder in the church vestibule, looking up at the trapdoor in the ceiling with a flashlight in one hand and a crowbar in the other. “Higher than the courthouse roof. From up there, you can see the whole Township Road 14 corridor, the Whitaker farms, and three miles of the county road toward Millbrook. If Kane sends anybody at us from the east, that’s where they’ll come from.” He handed the flashlight to Noah Simmons. “Hold this.”

Noah held it.

Rebecca Whitfield stood at the foot of the ladder with her arms folded and watched Jack work the crowbar into the edge of the trapdoor. She had not been up in the tower since she was nine years old, when her father had taken her up on a summer evening to see the sunset and the fireflies over the cornfields. She remembered the heat, and the dust, and the smell of old pigeon feathers, and the enormous iron bell hanging silent in the dark above her head like a sleeping animal.

She remembered her father’s hand on her shoulder. *Up here,* he had said, *you can see the whole town at once. Every house. Every family. That’s what a pastor’s supposed to do, Becky. See all of them. Pray for all of them.*

She had rolled her eyes. She had been nine.

The trapdoor gave with a shriek of rusted hinges and a shower of dust and dried leaves. Jack coughed, waved the dust away, and climbed up into the darkness. Noah followed with the flashlight. A moment later, Rebecca heard Jack’s voice, muffled and strange.

“Rebecca,” he called down. “You’d better come up here.”

She climbed.

The belfry was a small square room, twelve feet on a side, with louvered wooden shutters on all four walls letting in thin blades of gray December light. The bell hung above them from a massive oak

crossbeam — black iron, green with age, cast in Cincinnati in 1887 according to the raised letters on its lip. The floor was thick with dust and pigeon droppings and dead leaves.

And in the far corner, beneath a canvas tarp, sat a steel footlocker.

It was olive drab, Army surplus, the kind that had been sold at every Army-Navy store in America for fifty years. Its corners were dented. Its latches were secured with a small brass padlock. And on the lid, in white paint, in handwriting that Rebecca would have known anywhere, someone had lettered three words:

FOR THOSE LEFT BEHIND

Rebecca stopped at the top of the ladder.

She could not move.

"It's your dad's handwriting," Noah said softly. "Isn't it?"

Rebecca nodded. Her throat had closed.

"There's something taped to the lid," Jack said. He crouched beside the footlocker and shone the flashlight on it. A small white envelope, yellowed with age, secured with a strip of duct tape. On the front, in the same blue ink Caleb Whitfield had used in every margin of his Bible, were two words:

For Becky.

* * *

She read it sitting on the dusty floor of the belfry beneath the silent bell, with the thin gray light falling across the page, while Jack and Noah went quietly back down the ladder and left her alone.

The letter was dated fourteen months before the vanishing.

My dearest Becky,

If you are reading this, then I am gone, and so is your mother, and everything I have preached for thirty years has come to pass. I am sorry. I am so sorry that you are reading this. I prayed every day of your life that you would never have to.

I don't know how long I have been gone when you find this. I don't know what the world looks like around you. I imagine it is very dark. I imagine you are frightened, and angry, and grieving. Perhaps you are angry at me. Perhaps you are angry at God. I understand. I would be too.

But I want you to know something first, before anything else: I love you. Your mother loves you. And God loves you more than either of us ever could. He has not abandoned you. He left you here for a reason. If you are reading this letter, then He is still calling you home.

Rebecca pressed her hand against her mouth.

About a year and a half ago, the Lord began to put something heavy on my heart. I can't explain it any better than that. Every time I opened my Bible to Daniel, or Matthew 24, or Thessalonians, or

Revelation, I felt Him saying: Caleb, it's close. It's closer than you think. And those who are left behind will need a shepherd.

I argued with Him. I told Him I was just a country preacher in a small town in Ohio. I told Him there were thousands of men smarter than me who had written books about the end times. But He would not let it go. So I started recording. Not my Sunday sermons — those are in the church office, and I expect you've found them by now. These are different. These were recorded here, in this tower, late at night, after everyone was asleep, with no one listening but the Lord and the pigeons.

These are for you, Becky. For you and for anyone else who has been left behind and wants to know what to do now.

There are forty tapes. Play them in order. There are also eleven notebooks — Bible studies, outlines, lessons. They are not polished. Your mother always said my handwriting looked like a chicken had walked through ink. But they're true, and they're from the Word, and that is all that matters.

Gather the people, Becky. Whoever is left. Open the Word, and keep it open, no matter who is on the radio. Feed my sheep.

I know that you don't believe right now, as I write this. I know you think your old dad is a fool who has spent his life shouting about things that will never happen. That's all right. I've been called worse. But I have prayed for you every morning since the day you were born. And I believe with all my heart that God will answer that prayer — even if it is after I am gone.

When you see Him, and you will, you will understand everything.

Until then — be strong and of a good courage. And tell the truth.

All my love, forever,

Dad

P.S. The key to the footlocker is taped inside the back cover of my old Scofield. I figured if you ever found this, you'd have that Bible with you. If you don't — well, use Jack Reynolds's crowbar. I'm sure he has one.

Rebecca read the postscript three times.

Then she began to laugh. And the laughter broke into sobs, and she sat on the floor of the belfry with her father's letter clutched against her chest, and wept until there was nothing left.

Jack Reynolds.

Her father had known Jack. Everyone knew Jack — the ex-Ranger who lived out on Route 42 and never came to church. Her father had prayed for him, too. She was suddenly certain of it.

When she was finished crying, she wiped her face with her sleeve and opened her father's Bible to the back cover. Beneath the cracked leather endpaper, where the binding had pulled away slightly from the board, she felt something small and hard.

A key.

It had been there the whole time. Seven months. She had carried it everywhere she went, pressed against her heart, and never known.

* * *

First Baptist Church — Fellowship Hall

December 8 — 7:00 p.m.

They had to open the sanctuary.

Word had spread through town by noon — the way everything spread in Ashwood now, from the ration line to the tool library to the fairgrounds barns and out along the farm roads. *Rebecca found something. Pastor Whitfield left something. Tapes. A whole box of them. She's going to play the first one tonight.*

By six o'clock, the fellowship hall was full. By six-thirty, the stairs were full. By seven, Samuel Graves had given up and told Noah to move the cassette player and the old PA speaker — powered by a car battery that Hal Whitaker had charged off a windmill generator on his farm — upstairs to the pulpit.

The sanctuary filled. The balcony filled. The foyer filled. People stood outside in the snow on the front steps and on the lawn, bundled in coats and blankets, and Noah's youth group opened every window along the side of the church despite the cold so that they could hear.

Rebecca stood at the front of the sanctuary beside the pulpit, holding a cassette tape in her hand. It was an old TDK, ninety minutes, the kind her father had bought in bulk at the Walmart in Mansfield for years because he said they held up better than the others. On the label, in his careful printing, he had written:

TAPE 1 — IF YOU ARE HEARING THIS

Ethan stood near the side wall beneath the stained-glass window of the Good Shepherd, where he always stood. Beside him were Sarah, still pale from her illness but upright, and Jack, arms folded. Rachel Monroe sat in the back pew with Samuel Graves, her notebook open on her knee. Mayor Brooks sat near the front with Ellen. Isaiah Freeman sat among the refugees from Ontario, who had come in from the farms and the barns and filled the entire left side of the balcony.

Rebecca looked out at them. More than two thousand people, packed into a church built for six hundred.

She did not make a speech. She did not trust herself to.

"This was recorded by my father," she said simply. "In the bell tower of this church, about fourteen months before he disappeared." She held up the tape. "He left it for us."

She slid the cassette into the player, pressed the button, and stepped back.

The speaker hissed. There was a long pause, filled with the soft rustle of tape. Somewhere in the recording, faintly, a pigeon cooed. Then a man cleared his throat, and a voice filled the sanctuary — warm, unhurried, touched with the faint Kentucky drawl of a man who had grown up in the hills and never quite lost them.

"*If you are hearing this…*"

A shiver went through the church. Rebecca felt it — two thousand people drawing the same breath.

"*If you are hearing this, then I'm gone. And so is my wife, Carol. And so is everyone who truly belonged to Jesus Christ. We were caught up to meet Him in the air, just as the Scripture said we would be. First Thessalonians four, verses sixteen and seventeen. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. First Corinthians fifteen.*"

A pause. The sound of a Bible's pages turning.

"*My name is Caleb Whitfield. I have been the pastor of First Baptist Church in Ashwood, Ohio, for thirty years now. Some of you knew me. Most of you probably didn't. And some of you — I'm guessing here — some of you used to laugh at me. That's all right. I don't blame you. I'd have laughed at me too, if I didn't know what I know.*"

A few people in the pews laughed, softly, through tears.

"*I'm not recording this to say I told you so. God forbid. I'm recording this because right now, wherever you are, you're frightened. The world has just been turned upside down. Millions of people are gone. Your family, maybe. Your children, maybe. And there's going to be chaos — I don't know exactly what kind, but the Bible tells me there will be wars and famines and pestilences. Jesus said it plainly in Matthew twenty-four. You may be hungry. You may be sick. You may be hiding. And you're wondering what happened, and what it means, and whether there's any hope left.*"

"*I'm here to tell you that there is.*"

The church was absolutely silent.

"*The disappearance of the Church is not the end of God's grace. It's the beginning of the last great harvest. The Bible says that during the days that follow — the days of tribulation — a great multitude, which no man can number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, will come to Jesus Christ. Revelation seven, verse nine. And verse fourteen tells us who they are: 'These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'*"

"*That's you. That can be you. Right now, tonight. God has not closed the door.*"

In the second pew, a woman began to weep. Rebecca did not know her. One of the refugees, from the look of her coat.

"*So I want to do three things on these tapes,*" her father's voice went on. "*First, I want to tell you plainly how to be saved, because there's no more time for anything else. Second, I want to tell you what's coming — as best I understand it from the Word — so that you won't be deceived. Because there will be a great deception. Paul says so in Second Thessalonians two. And third, I want to tell you how to live. How to stay faithful. How to love each other and survive and not lose heart, all the way to the end.*"

"*Because friends — Jesus is coming back. Not for His Church in secret this time. In glory. On a white horse. Every eye shall see Him. And when He comes, He's going to make everything right.*"

“*So let’s begin with the only thing that matters.*”

And then Caleb Whitfield preached the gospel.

He did not shout. He did not pound the pulpit. He sat in a dusty bell tower with a cassette recorder in his lap and talked, the way a father talks to a child at the kitchen table. He talked about sin — not as a religious word, but as the thing everyone in that sanctuary already knew was true about themselves. He talked about a holy God who could not simply overlook it, and a loving God who would not leave them in it. He talked about a cross on a hill outside Jerusalem, and a Man who hung there in their place, and an empty tomb three days later.

“‘*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’ John three sixteen. You’ve heard it a thousand times on bumper stickers and football signs. Hear it now. Whosoever. That means the drunk and the addict. That means the man who beat his wife and the woman who had the abortion. That means the deacon who played church for thirty years and never knew Him.*”

On the left side of the balcony, Isaiah Freeman bowed his head.

“*That means you. Whoever you are. Whatever you’ve done.*”

“*And you don’t have to clean yourself up first. You can’t. Nobody can. You just come as you are. Romans ten, verse nine: ‘That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.’ That’s it. That’s the whole thing. It’s not complicated. It was never complicated. We just made it complicated because we didn’t want to bow.*”

A long pause on the tape. The pigeon cooed again, softly.

“*I’m going to stop the tape in a minute. And when I do, whoever is playing this for you — I pray it’s my daughter, Becky, but it could be anybody — I want them to give you a few minutes of quiet. And in that quiet, I want you to talk to God. Out loud or in your heart, it doesn’t matter. Tell Him the truth. Tell Him you’re a sinner. Tell Him you believe Jesus died for you and rose again. Ask Him to save you.*”

“*He will. He promised. And He has never broken a promise. Not once, in all of history.*”

“*I’ll be praying for you. Right now, tonight, in this tower, fourteen months or fourteen years before you hear this — I’m praying for you by name, though I don’t know your name. God does.*”

“*Let’s be quiet before the Lord.*”

The tape clicked.

The speaker hissed softly.

And in First Baptist Church in Ashwood, Ohio, two thousand people sat in absolute silence.

Rebecca did not move. She could not. She stood beside the pulpit with her father’s voice still ringing in her ears and watched.

At first, nothing happened.

Then, in the fourth row, an old man slid out of his pew and knelt in the aisle.

Then a young woman in the balcony.

Then a whole family — a father and mother and three small children — near the back.

Then more. And more. They came out of the pews and down the aisles and knelt on the worn red carpet in front of the pulpit and in the aisles and between the pews, wherever there was room. Farmers in overalls. Refugees in borrowed coats. Teenagers from Noah's youth group. A man in a Millbrook Fire Department jacket whom no one recognized. Old women who had sat in those pews every Sunday for fifty years and never once come forward.

Rebecca watched Gary Voss stand up slowly at the end of his pew.

He stood there for a long moment, his face working. Then he walked, not toward the front of the church, but across it — across the width of the sanctuary, past the pulpit, to the far side, where his son Kyle was kneeling in the aisle beside his pregnant wife.

Gary Voss knelt beside his son.

He did not say anything. He simply put his big, rough, dairy farmer's hand on Kyle's shoulder and bowed his head.

Kyle turned and looked at his father. Then he broke down completely, and the two of them knelt there in the aisle of First Baptist Church with their arms around each other, weeping, while Maggie Voss held both of their hands.

Rebecca could not see anything else after that. Her eyes were too full.

* * *

It was almost midnight when the last of them went home.

Rebecca sat alone in the front pew with the footlocker open at her feet. Forty cassette tapes, in neat rows, each one labeled in her father's hand. Eleven black-and-white composition notebooks, the kind children used in grade school, their pages crowded with his cramped handwriting.

She lifted out the notebooks one by one and read the titles he had written on the covers.

1 — How to Be Saved: A Study for New Believers. 2 — What Has Happened: The Rapture of the Church. 3 — Daniel's Seventieth Week. 4 — The Man of Peace. 5 — The Seals, the Trumpets, and the Bowls. 6 — How to Pray When Everything Is Falling Apart. 7 — The Church in the Catacombs: How to Gather in Secret. 8 — The Mark: What It Is and Why You Must Refuse It. 9 — Suffering and the Sovereignty of God. 10 — The Two Witnesses and the 144,000. 11 — Behold, He Cometh: The Glorious Return of Christ.

She sat with the last notebook in her hands for a long time.

"He knew," she said out loud, to the empty church. "He knew all of it."

"He didn't know," said a voice behind her. "He believed. That's different."

She turned. Samuel Graves was standing in the center aisle, leaning on his hickory cane, his coat buttoned up to his chin.

“I thought everyone had gone home,” she said.

“Everyone had. I came back.” The old man lowered himself slowly into the pew beside her. “Figured you might not want to be alone.”

For a while, neither of them spoke. The kerosene lanterns hissed on the walls.

“I don’t know if I can do this, Samuel,” Rebecca said finally, very quietly.

“Do what?”

“This.” She gestured at the footlocker. “Forty tapes. Eleven notebooks. *Gather the people. Feed my sheep.*” She shook her head. “He was a pastor for thirty-one years. He went to seminary. He knew Greek and Hebrew. He’d read the whole Bible fifty times.” Her voice broke. “I’m a twenty-eight-year-old woman who dropped out of UC and spent her twenties working at a marketing firm in Cincinnati and laughing at him. I used to text my friends during his sermons. I told him once, at Thanksgiving, in front of the whole family, that he was wasting his life.” She pressed her hands against her eyes. “And now he wants me to be a shepherd? To teach these people? I don’t even know what half of these notebooks mean.”

Samuel Graves was quiet for a long moment.

“You know who else said that?” he said finally.

“Who?”

“Moses.” The old farmer settled back in the pew. “God appeared to him in a burning bush and told him to go to Egypt and bring His people out of slavery. And Moses said, ‘*Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh?*’ And then he said, ‘*O my Lord, I am not eloquent… but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.*’ He had every excuse in the book.” Samuel smiled faintly. “And you know what God said?”

Rebecca shook her head.

“‘‘*Who hath made man’s mouth?… Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say.*’” He tapped the footlocker with the end of his cane. “God never calls the qualified, Rebecca. He qualifies the called. Moses was a stuttering shepherd who’d murdered a man. Peter was a fisherman who cussed and denied Jesus three times. Paul was a terrorist who’d been dragging Christians out of their houses. And the Lord built His whole Church on the backs of people like that.” He shrugged. “Seems to me a marketing girl from Cincinnati who laughed at her daddy is right in the tradition.”

Despite herself, Rebecca laughed.

“And there’s something else,” Samuel said, and his voice grew more serious. “Something I’ve been meaning to tell you for a while now. And tonight’s as good a time as any.”

“What?”

“The Church isn’t gone, Rebecca.”

She looked at him.

“I know what folks say,” Samuel went on. “The Church was raptured. The Church is in heaven. And that’s true, as far as it goes. Every believer who was alive on that day is with the Lord.” He leaned forward on his cane. “But the Church isn’t a building, and it isn’t a list of names in a Baptist membership book. The Church is whoever belongs to Jesus. And there are two thousand people who walked out of this sanctuary tonight who belong to Him. That’s a church. That’s *the* Church. The same one that met in upper rooms in Jerusalem and in catacombs under Rome and in caves in China.” He looked at her steadily. “And the Church’s mission hasn’t ended just because the Rapture happened. ‘*Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world.*’” He paused. “Even unto the end of the world, Rebecca. That’s where we are. And He’s still with us.”

Rebecca looked down at the notebooks in her lap.

“*Unto the end of the world*,” she repeated softly.

“Your daddy didn’t leave you a box of tapes so you could listen to them by yourself in a bell tower,” Samuel said. “He left you a job. And he left you the tools to do it.” He pushed himself slowly to his feet. “You won’t be doing it alone. I’ll help. Isaiah Freeman will help. That boy Noah will help. The Lord will help most of all.” He smiled. “And for what it’s worth — I’ve been listening to you teach from those margins for six months now. Your daddy’s handwriting may look like a chicken walked through ink. But you read it like a shepherd.”

He shuffled down the aisle toward the doors. At the back of the church, he stopped and looked back.

“Get some sleep, Rebecca. Tape Two tomorrow night.”

* * *

The Tape Room — First Baptist Church Basement

December 11 — 4:15 p.m.

It was Noah’s idea.

“We copy them,” he said, standing in the church basement in front of Rebecca, Samuel, and Isaiah Freeman with his arms full of electronics. “All of them. As many copies as we can make.”

He set the equipment down on a folding table. It was a strange collection — six dual-cassette boom boxes in various states of disrepair, salvaged from thrift stores and attics all over town over the summer, their plastic cases yellowed and scuffed. A tangle of power cords. A box of blank cassettes, most of them still in their shrink wrap — old TDKs and Maxells and Memorexes that the youth group had gathered from every junk drawer in Ashwood.

“These have high-speed dubbing,” Noah said, tapping one of the boom boxes. “You put the original in one deck and a blank in the other and hit the button, and it copies the whole side in about fifteen

minutes. We've got six of them working. Hal says we can run them off the windmill batteries." He looked at Rebecca. "We make copies of all forty tapes. Then we send them out. To the farms, where the refugees are staying. To the barns. To every house in town that's got a cassette player. We give Isaiah a set for the people from Ontario." He hesitated. "And maybe — maybe we get a set to Carl Haskins. For Millbrook. And one to the bishop at Pike's Mill."

"And Iron Ridge?" Isaiah Freeman asked quietly.

Noah looked at him. "How would we even get it there?"

"The Lord has His ways," the old deacon said. "He got Joseph into Pharaoh's house. He got Daniel into Nebuchadnezzar's court." He smiled faintly. "I expect He can get a cassette tape into Marcus Kane's."

Rebecca looked at the boom boxes. Then at the footlocker in the corner, with its forty tapes. Then at Noah, eighteen years old, standing in the church basement with his arms folded and a look of stubborn hope on his thin, serious face.

"How many blank tapes do we have?" she asked.

Noah grinned.

"Two thousand, one hundred and forty," he said. "We counted."

* * *

They called it the Shepherd's Network.

Noah named it. Rebecca thought it was a little grand for a basement full of teenagers and broken boom boxes, but she didn't argue. Within a week, it had taken on a life of its own.

The youth group worked in shifts, twenty-four hours a day — two teenagers at each boom box, copying tapes in the flickering light of a kerosene lantern, labeling each one by hand with a black marker in careful imitation of Caleb Whitfield's printing. When the windmill batteries ran low, they switched to a bank of car batteries that Jack's mechanics charged off the old diesel generator behind the courthouse, fifteen minutes at a time, when no one was looking.

Every morning, a dozen young volunteers went out on bicycles and on horseback and on foot, carrying canvas bags full of tapes. They rode out along the frozen farm roads to every farmhouse where refugees were staying, and left a set of tapes and a portable player. They went door to door in town. They left tapes at the tool library and the Rialto and the clinic.

Isaiah Freeman took a set to the fairgrounds barns, where the last of the sick were recovering, and every night he played one tape in each barn and then sat with whoever wanted to talk. Within a week, he had a Bible study in each barn. Within two weeks, he had six.

Carl Haskins took a set back to Millbrook, hidden under the seat of his pickup truck. He did not say what he did with them. But a week later, a rider came down from Millbrook with a message for Rebecca, written in pencil on the back of an old seed catalog: *Forty families listening. They want the notebooks too. Can you copy them?* It was signed, simply, *C.H.*

Bishop Jacob Brenneman took a set back to Pike's Mill in his black buggy. The Mennonites did not own cassette players. They borrowed one from a neighbor.

And on the evening of December fourteenth, a boy named Marcus Webb — sixteen years old, one of the youth group's best riders — rode his mare down Township Road 14 to the abandoned cornfield at the edge of Ashwood's eastern checkpoint. It was the last place before the long empty stretch of road that led southwest toward Iron Ridge. He had been told to leave a set of tapes in a sealed coffee can at the base of the road sign there, where Kane's scouts were known to pass.

He did. He wrapped the can in plastic against the snow. On the lid, in black marker, he wrote, the way Noah had told him to:

FREE. FOR ANYONE WHO WANTS TO KNOW WHAT HAPPENED.

When Marcus rode back past the sign two days later, the can was gone.

Nobody knew who took it.

* * *

The Courthouse Roof

December 15 — 11:10 p.m.

Tape Nine was called *The Soldier Who Came to Jesus.*

Ethan had listened to it that evening, in the sanctuary with a thousand other people, standing in his usual spot beside the stained-glass window. It was a sermon on Matthew chapter eight — the Roman centurion who came to Jesus asking Him to heal his servant.

"*Here's a man who has spent his whole life in the army,*" Caleb Whitfield's voice had said, hissing gently through the speaker. "*He knows how to give orders and how to take them. He knows about authority. He's probably seen more death than anybody else in the crowd that day. And he's not a Jew. He's an outsider. A Gentile. A soldier of the occupying army. Everybody in town probably hated him.*"

"*And he comes to Jesus and he says, 'Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed. For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth.'*"

"*And Jesus — listen to this — Jesus marveled. The Son of God, who made the stars, marveled at a Roman soldier. And He said, 'I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.'*"

"*There are soldiers listening to this tape, I expect. Men who've carried a rifle and seen things they can't forget. Men who've done things they can't forget. And you think God could never want somebody like you. You think you've seen too much and done too much to ever be clean again.*"

"*But Jesus loves soldiers. He loved that centurion. He loved the centurion at the foot of the cross, who said, 'Truly this was the Son of God.' He loved Cornelius, the first Gentile convert in the book of Acts — another centurion. I think He has a special place in His heart for men who understand authority, because they understand what it means when He says, 'All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.'*"

"*If you're a soldier, and you're listening to this — He's calling you. Come on home.*"

Ethan had looked across the church at the end of the tape. Jack Reynolds was standing at the back, where he always stood, with his arms folded. His face had not moved. But he had not moved either. When the tape ended, and people began to come forward, Jack had turned abruptly and walked out.

Now Ethan found him on the courthouse roof, sitting on the parapet with his rifle across his knees and his breath smoking in the frozen air, looking out at the dark town.

He did not say anything. He just sat down on the parapet beside him.

For a long time, they sat in silence.

"Kandahar," Jack said finally. His voice was very low. "Two thousand and ten. We got bad intelligence on a compound outside Arghandab. Taliban commander. We went in at night." He stopped. "There wasn't any Taliban commander. There was a family. A man and his wife and his mother and five kids. The man came out of the house with an AK because he thought we were bandits. We killed him. And his wife, when she came running out after him. And —" He stopped again. His jaw worked. "And a little girl. Maybe six. She got caught in the crossfire. I was the one who fired."

Ethan said nothing.

"I carried her out to the medevac myself. She died before it landed." Jack stared out at the dark. "I've seen her face every night for sixteen years, Ethan. Every single night. I drink until I can't see it anymore. I work until I can't see it. I train these farmers until I'm so tired I can't think." He shook his head. "Eleven weeks — no, it's been more than that now — sixteen weeks I've been going to Rebecca's Bible study. Listening to all of it. Grace and forgiveness and washing your sins white as snow. And every time, I think — *not me.* Maybe the rest of you. Not me. Not with her face in my head."

He was quiet for a long moment.

"And then that old man on that tape," he said roughly, "sitting up in that bell tower, fourteen months before he died — or whatever happened to him — and he says, *There are soldiers listening to this tape.*" Jack's voice cracked. "Like he knew. Like he was talking to *me.*"

"Maybe he was," Ethan said quietly.

Jack turned and looked at him.

"Rebecca found a letter in that footlocker," Ethan said. "Her dad wrote that if she couldn't find the key, she should use Jack Reynolds's crowbar." He paused. "He knew you, Jack. He prayed for you. I'd bet my life on it."

Jack Reynolds stared at him. Then he put his face in his hands.

He did not make a sound. But his shoulders shook, and shook, and did not stop for a long time. Ethan sat beside him on the frozen parapet and put his hand on his back and waited, the way Samuel Graves had taught him to wait, the way Emily had waited for him for eleven years.

"I don't know how to do this," Jack said finally, into his hands. "I don't know what to say."

“You don’t have to say anything fancy,” Ethan said. “Nobody taught me either. I just told Him the truth.” He paused. “You’re a soldier, Jack. Just report in.”

Jack lifted his head. His face was wet in the starlight.

He looked up at the sky for a long moment. Then he bowed his head, and in a low, rough, halting voice — the voice of a man giving a report to a commanding officer he had never met — he began to speak.

Ethan didn’t listen to the words. They weren’t meant for him.

When it was over, Jack sat very still on the parapet for a long time, looking out at the dark town.

“Does it go away?” he asked quietly. “Her face?”

Ethan thought about Emily’s reading glasses on the windowsill. The crayon drawing on the refrigerator. His daughter’s face in the pink rain slicker, holding up a tadpole in a jar.

“No,” he said honestly. “I don’t think it goes away. But it changes. It doesn’t accuse you anymore.” He looked at Jack. “Now it’s just somebody you’re going to get to say you’re sorry to someday. In person.”

Jack was silent for a long time.

“‘*As far as the east is from the west,*’” he said finally, very softly. “‘*So far hath he removed our transgressions from us.*’” He almost smiled. “Psalm one-oh-three. My granny again. That woman’s been ambushing me with Scripture for thirty years.”

“She had good aim.”

“She had good aim,” Jack agreed.

* * *

First Baptist Church — The Baptistery

December 20 — 2:00 p.m.

The baptistery behind the pulpit of First Baptist Church had been built in 1954. It was a tiled pool about six feet square and four feet deep, set into the wall above the choir loft, with a painted mural of the Jordan River on the wall behind it. It had not been filled since April.

It took Noah’s youth group two full days to fill it — hauling water from the treatment plant in milk tankers, heating it in every pot and kettle and wash tub in Ashwood on every wood stove in town, carrying it up the narrow back stairs to the baptistery in five-gallon buckets. By the afternoon of the twentieth, the water was lukewarm, the church was full, and two hundred and twelve people were waiting to go under.

Samuel Graves did the baptizing. He stood waist-deep in the water in an old pair of fishing waders and a white shirt, his silver hair plastered to his head, his gnarled hands steady. Rebecca stood at the top of the baptistery steps with a list and a stack of towels. Isaiah Freeman stood beside her, reading each name aloud to the congregation.

They came one by one.

Walt Kimble, seventy-nine years old, leaning on Noah's arm down the steps.

Kyle and Maggie Voss, together, holding hands. Gary Voss watched from the front row with tears running down his weathered face.

Tom Garrison, the man from Mansfield, while his daughter Lily stood on a chair in the third row clutching her rabbit and shouting, "*That's my daddy!*"

Luis Ortega. Donna Pierce. Megan Torres. Hal Whitaker, who had been baptized as a baby in the Lutheran church and told Samuel gruffly that he wanted to do it again, properly this time, now that he meant it.

Daniel Brooks.

The mayor came down the steps in his shirtsleeves, trembling, his wire-rimmed glasses left behind on the pew beside his wife. He stood in the water before Samuel Graves and looked out at the town he had served for eleven years, and he did not say anything at all. He simply nodded. And Samuel laid him back into the water, and brought him up again, and Daniel Brooks came up gasping and laughing and weeping, and in the front pew, Ellen Brooks put both hands over her mouth and sobbed.

And then, near the end of the line, Jack Reynolds.

The whole church went still when Isaiah Freeman read his name.

Jack came down the steps slowly, in a white T-shirt and a pair of old fatigue pants, his face set like stone. He stood before Samuel Graves in the lukewarm water. The old farmer put one hand on his back and raised the other toward heaven.

"Jack Reynolds," Samuel said, and his gravelly voice carried to every corner of the church. "Upon your profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, I baptize you, my brother, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

He laid him back into the water.

When Jack came up, he stood very still for a moment in the baptistery, water streaming down his face. Then he looked up — past the mural of the Jordan River, past the old church rafters, past everything — and something moved across his hard, weathered face that Ethan had never seen there before.

Peace.

Ethan did not realize he was weeping until Sarah put her hand on his arm.

* * *

First Baptist Church — The Pastor's Study

December 20 — 11:45 p.m.

Rebecca found it that night.

She had gone back to the footlocker after everyone had gone home, the way she did every night now, to choose the tape for the next evening. She sat on the floor of her father's study in the lamplight with the tapes spread out around her in neat rows, checking the numbers against her list.

One through twenty-seven. All there.

Twenty-nine through forty. All there.

Twenty-eight was missing.

She checked again. She checked the footlocker. She checked the shelves in the tape room downstairs where Noah's youth group did their copying. She checked the list of tapes that had been duplicated — the youth group had only gotten as far as Tape Twenty.

Tape Twenty-eight had never been copied.

And now it was gone.

She sat on the floor of the study with her heart pounding. Someone had come into the church. Someone had gone through the footlocker. Someone had taken one tape — only one — out of forty.

With trembling hands, she reached for the stack of composition notebooks and found the one her father had labeled *Notebook 7 — The Church in the Catacombs.* Near the back, she knew, he had written an outline for every tape, in order, one page each. She turned the pages until she found it.

TAPE 28.

At the top of the page, in her father's cramped blue printing, was the title:

THE JUDAS AMONG US

Below it, a verse:

"*Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me.*" *— Psalm 41:9*

And below that, a single line of his outline, underlined twice:

In every remnant, there will be one who sells the others. Do not be surprised. Do not be afraid. But watch — and pray for him, because he is more lost than any of you.

Rebecca read it three times.

Then she closed the notebook, very slowly, and sat on the floor of her father's study in the lamplight, and listened to the silence of the empty church around her.

Somewhere in Ashwood tonight, someone was holding a cassette tape in his hands.

And somewhere in Ashwood tonight, someone did not want the town to hear it.

"*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

* * *

END OF CHAPTER 7

CHAPTER 8

The Iron Alliance

"*Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish.*"

— Psalm 146:3–4

* * *

Iron Ridge, Ohio — The Manager's House

December 23 — 8:15 p.m.

The man from the International Relief Coordination Office arrived in a helicopter.

Marcus Kane heard it long before he saw it — a deep, rhythmic thudding that rolled across the frozen valley from the northeast and set every dog in Iron Ridge barking. Men poured out of the barracks with their rifles. The floodlights on the southern towers blazed to life for the first time in weeks. And out of the black December sky came a sleek gray aircraft with no markings, its searchlight sweeping across the old employee parking lot until it found a clear patch of frozen gravel and settled onto it in a hurricane of snow.

No one in Iron Ridge had seen a working helicopter in eight months.

Marcus stood on the steps of the manager's house with Dutch Kessler at his side and watched the rotors spin down. The side door slid open. A single man stepped out onto the gravel, ducking beneath the slowing blades, and walked unhurriedly toward the house as though he had landed in an ordinary parking lot on an ordinary evening.

He was perhaps forty-five, slim and fair-haired, wearing a charcoal wool overcoat, a gray scarf, and leather gloves. He carried a slim black briefcase. His shoes were polished. His hair was neatly cut. He was, Marcus realized, the cleanest human being he had seen since April.

The man climbed the steps and held out his hand.

"Colonel Kane," he said. His accent was faintly European — Scandinavian, perhaps, or Dutch — smoothed by years of speaking perfect English. "Julian Sorensen. Regional Facilitator for North America, International Relief Coordination Office. Thank you for agreeing to see me."

Marcus looked at the hand for a moment. Then he shook it.

"You didn't give me much choice," he said. "You sent a man with a satellite phone to my gate three days ago and said you'd be here tonight."

“And yet you could have shot down my helicopter.” Sorensen smiled pleasantly. “You have the weapons for it. I checked. The fact that you didn’t suggests we have something to talk about.” He glanced past Marcus at the lit doorway. “Shall we go inside? I’ve been in that aircraft for four hours, and I’m told Ohio winters are unkind.”

* * *

They sat in the study on the second floor, with the oil lamp burning on the desk between them and a fire crackling in the grate for the first time since Diane had died. Marcus had ordered it lit. He was not entirely sure why. Perhaps to show this clean, polished man that Iron Ridge was not a camp of starving savages.

Sorensen declined the offer of chicory. Instead he opened his briefcase and produced a slim silver thermos, poured two cups, and slid one across the desk.

Marcus smelled it before he tasted it.

Coffee. Real coffee. Hot and dark and rich.

He had not tasted coffee since June.

“A small courtesy,” Sorensen said. “We have a great deal of it in Brussels. Brazil’s harvest was excellent this year, and the shipping lanes are open again.” He sipped from his own cup. “You’d be surprised how quickly the world is recovering, Colonel. Outside of North America, I mean. Europe is stabilizing. Asia is stabilizing. The Middle East is — well, the Middle East is more peaceful tonight than it has been in three thousand years.” He smiled. “It’s remarkable what people will agree to when they’re frightened enough.”

Marcus drank the coffee slowly and said nothing.

“The United States, however,” Sorensen continued, “is a problem. You understand that better than anyone. Twenty-three cities destroyed. The federal government gone. The states collapsing. Three hundred and thirty million people fragmented into — what did our last estimate say? — something like eleven thousand independent communities, militias, and armed factions. Fighting over fuel. Fighting over grain. Burning each other’s camps.” He glanced at Marcus over the rim of his cup. “You’ve been busy yourself, I understand. Ontario, wasn’t it? The camp by the interstate?”

Marcus’s face did not change. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Of course not.” Sorensen set down his cup. “Colonel, I’ll be direct, because I respect you, and because I have eleven more stops to make before Christmas. The Office cannot help eleven thousand communities. We don’t have the resources. We don’t have the time. And frankly, we don’t have the patience. What we can do — what we are prepared to do — is work with a small number of strong, reliable regional authorities. Men who can maintain order. Men who can guarantee that when we deliver a planeload of medicine, it reaches the people it’s meant for, instead of being stolen by the first warlord with a rifle.”

He opened the briefcase again and withdrew a single sheet of thick cream-colored paper. He laid it on the desk.

In the upper corner, embossed in gold, was a seal: a stylized globe encircled by twelve interlocking rings.

“This is a charter,” Sorensen said. “It designates the holder as the Regional Coordinating Authority for North-Central Ohio. Seven counties. Roughly a hundred and forty thousand surviving residents. The Authority will receive priority access to relief shipments — food, fuel, medicine, communications equipment. It will be recognized by the Office as the lawful governing body of the region. And when the United Nations of the new world is formally constituted next year — and it will be, Colonel, sooner than you think — the Authority will have a seat at the table.”

Marcus looked down at the paper. He did not touch it.

“And what does the Office want in return?”

“Order,” Sorensen said simply. “Consolidation. We want the towns within those seven counties unified under a single command — yours — by the end of January. We want every resident registered, using our forms, by the first of March. We want the fighting stopped.” He paused. “And we want your cooperation with certain… population management priorities that the Office will communicate to you from time to time.”

“Such as?”

Sorensen took another sip of coffee. When he spoke again, his voice had not changed at all — still pleasant, still mild, still reasonable.

“There are communities in your region,” he said, “that have been identified as potentially resistant to integration. Communities organized around exclusive religious identities. They tend to reject registration. They tend to spread disinformation about the relief effort — conspiracy theories, apocalyptic prophecies, that sort of thing. Left unchecked, they can destabilize an entire region.” He set the cup down carefully. “One of them is a town called Ashwood. I believe you’re familiar with it.”

Marcus said nothing.

“Ashwood voted against joining the Tri-County Compact,” Sorensen went on. “Ashwood refused the registration forms. Ashwood has taken in almost a thousand refugees who also refused registration. And Ashwood’s churches have begun distributing recordings — sermons, apparently, by a pastor who disappeared in April — throughout the surrounding communities. Our facilitators have found copies in Millbrook, in Pike’s Mill.” He paused. “Even here, I’m told. In Iron Ridge.”

That was the first thing that made Marcus Kane’s expression change. It was only a flicker. But Sorensen saw it, and smiled.

“The Office doesn’t care how you bring Ashwood into compliance, Colonel,” he said gently. “That’s entirely your affair. We simply need it done. A stable region cannot have a rebellious heart.” He slid the charter an inch closer across the desk. “Do we have an understanding?”

For a long moment, Marcus did not answer.

He looked at the charter. At the gold seal. At the words *Regional Coordinating Authority.* Seven counties. A hundred and forty thousand people. Medicine. Fuel. A seat at the table of the new world.

He thought of Diane’s apron lying on the kitchen floor. Of Tyler at the doorway of this very study, saying *How can she have been wrong?* Of an old Mennonite bishop in a gravel lane, saying *I will pray for you.*

He thought of Harlan’s Crossing. Of the mayor and the four men who had fired on his scouts.

Everything within a hundred miles. That had been his goal since June. He had never dreamed of anything larger.

And here was a man offering him seven counties and a seat at the table of the world, for the price of one small town full of hymn singers.

He picked up a pen.

“We have an understanding,” he said, and signed.

Outside the study door, in the dark hallway, a fourteen-year-old boy in a Cleveland Browns sweatshirt stood absolutely still with his back pressed against the wall, holding his breath.

When he heard the pen scratch across the paper, Tyler Kane closed his eyes.

Then he turned and slipped silently back down the hall to his room, where a small cassette player lay hidden beneath his mattress, beside his mother’s Bible.

* * *

The Grange Hall, County Road 7

December 27 — 1:00 p.m.

The Ashwood County Grange Hall had been built in 1911 — a long, white, two-story frame building with a green metal roof and a wide front porch, set on the crest of a low hill where County Road 7 crossed the old Pike’s Mill road. For a hundred years it had been the heart of farm life in the southern part of the county. Farmers had met there to argue about milk prices and seed corn. Their wives had held quilting bees and potluck suppers in the big downstairs hall. Their children had danced there on Saturday nights under paper lanterns, and courted, and married, and brought their own children back to dance.

Now there were two M119 howitzers parked beneath tarps behind it, and a ring of sandbagged machine-gun positions on the frozen hillside, and forty of Marcus Kane’s best men standing guard on the porch with rifles.

And inside, around a long plywood table that had once held church-supper casseroles, sat the leaders of seventeen towns.

Carl Haskins sat near the end of the table and felt sick.

He had come because the Compact’s Council had voted to come. Ray Talbot had pushed for it — had pushed hard, standing up in the Millbrook fire hall three nights before Christmas and telling the Council that Kane had sent an invitation, and that it was an opportunity, and that they would be fools to

refuse to at least listen. *He's not asking for surrender,* Talbot had said. *He's asking for a partnership. Seventeen towns, working together. Isn't that what the Compact was always supposed to be?*

The Council had voted four to one to attend.

Carl had been the one.

Now he sat in the Grange Hall with his hands clasped on the table in front of him and looked at the faces around it. He knew some of them. The mayors of Harlan's Crossing and Brinkley — or rather, the men Kane had put in charge of Harlan's Crossing and Brinkley after the old mayors were gone. The township trustees of Pike's Mill, two gray-bearded Mennonites in plain black coats who sat side by side and did not speak to anyone. Men from Galion and Crestline and Shelby. Men from towns Carl had never heard of.

And across the table, near the head, Ray Talbot. Freshly shaved. Wearing a clean shirt.

Talbot did not look at him.

At exactly one o'clock, the door at the back of the hall opened, and Marcus Kane walked in.

He did not wear a uniform. He wore a plain dark wool coat over a gray sweater, and his hair was neatly combed, and he carried no weapon. He walked the length of the long table without hurrying, nodding to the men on either side, and stopped at the head. Dutch Kessler took up a position behind him, arms folded. Behind Kessler, a thin, fair-haired man in a charcoal overcoat stood quietly against the wall with a black briefcase at his feet.

Carl had never seen him before. But he recognized the type immediately. He had seen the same man in Millbrook in October, with a satellite phone and a box of forms.

"Gentlemen," Marcus Kane said. "Thank you for coming."

His voice was not loud. It did not need to be. The hall went instantly silent.

"I'm going to be brief," Kane said. "Because I know most of you have ridden a long way in the cold, and because what I have to say is simple." He looked down the length of the table. "Eight months ago, the United States of America died. You know that. You've buried it. You've watched your towns starve and bleed and burn while you waited for somebody — anybody — to come and save you. The President. The governor. The Army. The Red Cross."

He paused.

"Nobody came," he said. "Nobody is coming. Except me."

Nobody moved.

"Seventeen towns are represented at this table," Kane went on. "Eight of them already stand with Iron Ridge. The rest of you have been fighting for your lives alone — or in little alliances that fall apart the first time somebody steals a tank of diesel." He did not look at Carl. He didn't have to. "Alone, every one of you will die. You'll run out of food in February, or medicine in March, or fighters the first time a real army comes over your hill. Together, we are thirty-four thousand people. Nine hundred fighters. Artillery. Walls. And as of four days ago —"

He reached into the inside pocket of his coat and drew out a folded sheet of thick cream-colored paper. He unfolded it and held it up, so that everyone at the table could see the gold seal gleaming in the pale winter light from the windows.

"— the official recognition of the International Relief Coordination Office as the Regional Coordinating Authority for North-Central Ohio."

A murmur ran around the table. Carl saw men lean forward. Saw their eyes fix on the gold seal. Saw something kindle in their gaunt, exhausted faces that he recognized, because he had felt it himself on the day the gray planes came over Millbrook and dropped forty pallets of medicine out of the sky.

Hope.

"The Office has promised relief shipments to every community in the Authority," Kane said. "Food. Fuel. Medicine. Beginning in January. Every town at this table that joins the Iron Alliance will receive its share. Every one." He laid the charter down on the table. "In return, I ask for three things."

He held up one finger.

"Loyalty. Every community in the Alliance swears an oath of allegiance to the Authority. Its fighters come under unified command. Its leaders answer to me."

A second finger.

"Order. Every resident is registered. Every weapon is accounted for. No town raids another. No town hoards. We share, and we survive."

A third finger.

"Unity." His voice dropped slightly. "The Alliance speaks with one voice. There will be no dissent that endangers the common safety. No rival authorities. No factions. No agitators spreading fear and division among the people." He paused. "You've all heard about the tapes coming out of Ashwood. The sermons. The prophecies. Telling people that the relief effort is some kind of satanic plot. Telling them not to register. Telling them to refuse the only help that's ever going to reach them." His jaw tightened. "I respect a man's right to his faith. But I will not allow any man's faith to starve his neighbor's children. Not in my Alliance."

He lowered his hand.

"Security," Marcus Kane said. "In exchange for loyalty. That's the offer. It's the only offer anybody is ever going to make you." He looked slowly down the table, meeting every eye. "The charter is here. Any man who wants to sign for his town may do so today."

For a long moment, no one moved.

Then Ray Talbot stood up.

He walked the length of the table without looking at anyone, stopped beside Kane, and picked up the pen that lay beside the charter. He turned to face the table.

“On behalf of the towns of Carverton, Oak Hill, Danby Junction, and New Salem,” he said, “and by vote of the Council of the Tri-County Compact, taken last night —”

Carl came halfway out of his chair.

“*What* vote?”

Talbot finally looked at him. His pale eyes were flat and empty.

“The Council met last night, Carl. You weren’t invited.” He shrugged. “Four to one.”

Carl stared at him.

“You can’t sign for the Compact,” he said hoarsely. “The Compact’s five towns. Millbrook’s the biggest. Millbrook didn’t vote.”

“Millbrook can sign for itself,” Talbot said. “Or not.” He turned back to the charter, bent over it, and signed his name in four places, one for each town, in neat, careful letters.

Then he straightened and held out his hand to Marcus Kane. Kane shook it.

And one by one, the others followed.

The men from Galion and Crestline and Shelby. The new mayors of Harlan’s Crossing and Brinkley, who had no choice. Men from towns Carl had never heard of, who came up the aisle slowly, some of them with their eyes down, some of them with their jaws clenched, some of them almost eagerly. The two Mennonite trustees from Pike’s Mill came last. They did not sign. They laid a folded sheet of paper on the table beside the charter, bowed slightly to Kane, and returned to their seats. Carl learned later what it said: *Pike’s Mill will pay its tax and keep the peace. We swear no oaths. — J. Brenneman, Bishop.*

Kane read it, and looked at the two old men for a long moment, and let it lie.

Sixteen towns.

Then there was only Carl.

He was still standing. He did not remember deciding to stand. His big hands were clenched at his sides, and his heart was pounding so hard he could feel it in his throat.

Every face at the table turned toward him.

Marcus Kane looked down the long plywood table at him with no expression at all.

“Mr. Haskins,” he said quietly. “Millbrook is the largest town in the old Compact. Four thousand people. You’ve got a contaminated well and a cemetery full of children. You’ve already received one relief shipment from the Office. I’m told it saved a great many lives.” He tilted his head slightly. “Will Millbrook join the Alliance?”

Carl looked at the charter on the table. At the gold seal, gleaming.

He thought of the forty families in Millbrook who had refused to register, and had watched the gray planes drop medicine on everyone but them. He thought of the box of antibiotics he had stolen from the

depot, and driven through the snow to Ashwood, and set down on the walnut table in the courthouse. He thought of Danny in the Ashwood gymnasium, burning with fever, and the woman doctor with her hands in the honey, bowing her head over his nephew and praying out loud: *Because You're good. And because he wants to play baseball in the spring.*

He thought of himself on his knees in the snow behind the gym. *Thank You. Thank You. Thank You.*

And he thought of a sermon he had listened to three nights ago, alone in his kitchen in Millbrook, on a cassette tape that Ethan Walker's church had sent him. Tape Eleven. *The Three Hebrew Children.* A dead pastor's voice, hissing out of a cheap plastic speaker, telling the story of three young men who stood in front of the golden image in the plain of Dura while every other man in the kingdom bowed down.

"'*Be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.*'"

Carl Haskins took a long, slow breath.

"No," he said.

The hall was absolutely silent.

"Millbrook won't sign," Carl said. His voice shook, but it did not break. "Not today. Not ever. I don't know much. I'm a plumber. I never finished community college. I never went to church till a month ago." He swallowed. "But I know what that seal is. I've seen it. I've seen what happens to the people who won't put their names on the list. And I know that the last time a man in this county offered me medicine for my town, it came from a friend who didn't ask me for anything." He looked at Kane. "I'll take my chances with him."

He turned and walked toward the door.

Nobody stopped him. Nobody said anything. He walked the length of the Grange Hall with forty eyes on his back, and pushed open the door, and walked out onto the frozen porch past Kane's guards, and down the steps to his pickup truck, and climbed in, and drove away down County Road 7 toward Millbrook.

His hands did not stop shaking for ten miles.

Behind him, in the Grange Hall, Marcus Kane stood at the head of the long table and watched the door swing shut.

Then he turned to Dutch Kessler. He did not say anything. He simply looked at him.

Kessler nodded once, very slightly, and went out through the back.

Against the wall, Julian Sorensen picked up his briefcase and smiled.

* * *

Millbrook, Ohio

December 29 — 2:40 a.m.

Jolene Haskins Pratt woke in the dark to the sound of engines.

She lay still in the narrow bed in the back bedroom of her brother's house on Mill Street, listening. Two engines. Maybe three. Diesel. Coming slowly down the street with no headlights. She could tell there were no headlights because the light through the curtains did not change.

Beside her, in the other twin bed, her son Danny was asleep, his healing leg propped on a pillow. He had come home to Millbrook on the twenty-second, still on crutches, with a jar of Mennonite honey and a stack of cassette tapes and a Bible that the youth pastor in Ashwood — a skinny kid named Noah — had given him on the day he left. He had been reading it every night since, by candlelight, under the covers, the way he used to read comic books when he was eight.

The engines stopped outside.

Jolene sat up.

She heard doors open. Boots on the frozen street. Low voices. Then, very close, the sound of the front door of the house — Carl's front door — being kicked open.

She was out of bed before she knew it, running barefoot down the dark hallway toward the front of the house, and she saw it all in the space of three heartbeats, lit only by the red glow of a shielded flashlight.

Men in the living room. Six of them. Seven. Black balaclavas over their faces. Woodland camouflage. Rifles.

And Carl, in a T-shirt and sweatpants, being dragged out of his bedroom by two of them, his enormous body twisting and heaving against their grip. A third man hit him in the stomach with the butt of a rifle. Carl doubled over with a sound Jolene would never forget.

"*Carl!*"

One of the men turned and pointed his rifle at her. She stopped.

"Go back to bed, ma'am," he said. His voice was calm. Almost polite. "This doesn't concern you."

"That's my *brother* —"

"Your brother is under arrest by order of the Regional Coordinating Authority," the man said. "For obstruction of relief operations and incitement against the public order." He said it the way a man reads words off a card. "He'll be treated fairly. Go back to bed."

Carl lifted his head. His nose was bleeding. His eyes found hers across the dark room.

"Jo," he said. "Take care of Danny." He coughed. "Tell Ethan —"

The man with the rifle butt hit him again.

They dragged him out the front door into the freezing dark. Jolene heard a truck door slam, and the engines start, and the trucks roll slowly away down Mill Street with no lights, the way they had come.

And then there was nothing but silence, and the cold air pouring in through the broken front door, and her son standing behind her in the hallway on one crutch, his face white as paper.

* * *

By dawn, Millbrook knew.

Carl Haskins was gone. So was Pastor Ron Deckard, the retired Methodist minister who had been leading the Bible study for the forty families who refused to register. So was his wife. So were Bill and Nancy Stroud, who had hosted the Bible study in their living room. So were Frank Oyler, who had helped Carl steal the box of medicine from the depot, and Marcy Allen, the schoolteacher who had been copying Pastor Whitfield's tapes on a boom box in her classroom.

Eleven people in all. Taken from their homes between two and four in the morning by men in black masks. No warrants. No charges read aloud except the ones on the card. No word of where they had been taken.

They were simply gone.

At seven o'clock that morning, a pickup truck drove slowly down Main Street, stopping every half block while a man in camouflage got out and nailed a printed notice to a telephone pole. By eight o'clock, there was one on every corner in Millbrook.

NOTICE

BY ORDER OF THE REGIONAL COORDINATING AUTHORITY FOR NORTH-CENTRAL OHIO

The town of Millbrook is hereby placed under the protection of the Iron Alliance.

Mr. Raymond Talbot is appointed District Administrator for the Northern District, effective immediately.

All residents shall report for registration at the Millbrook Fire Hall between January 2 and January 15.

All relief supplies shall be distributed through the District Administrator.

Persons who obstruct the relief effort, spread disinformation, or incite resistance against the public order will be removed from the community for the protection of all.

— M. J. Kane, Regional Coordinator

Jolene Pratt stood on the corner of Main and Mill in the gray morning light and read it twice.

Then she went home, and packed a bag, and found her son.

* * *

North Checkpoint, Ashwood

December 30 — 11:20 p.m.

The horse came out of the snow like a ghost.

It was a gray mare, lathered and stumbling, her breath pluming white in the frozen air, and she came up State Route 39 at a ragged trot through the falling snow with two figures on her back. The volunteers at the north checkpoint saw her at the last moment and nearly opened fire.

Then one of the figures raised a hand and screamed, in a cracking teenage voice:

"*Don't shoot! Don't shoot! It's Danny Haskins! I need to see Ethan Walker!*"

* * *

Ethan got there in eleven minutes.

He found Danny and his mother in the north checkpoint guard shack, wrapped in blankets in front of the wood stove, shaking so violently that their teeth chattered. Danny's crutch lay on the floor beside him. His face was chapped raw and streaked with frozen tears. His mother — a thin, tough, weathered woman in her forties who looked like a smaller version of Carl — sat beside him with her arm locked around his shoulders.

"They took him," Danny said, before Ethan had even closed the door. "Uncle Carl. They took him, Mr. Walker. Men in masks, in the middle of the night. They beat him and they dragged him out and they took him."

Ethan crouched in front of the boy.

"Who, Danny?"

"*Kane.*" It was Jolene Pratt who answered. Her voice was hoarse. "Kane's men. Carl went to that meeting at the Grange Hall on Friday. Kane got sixteen towns to sign his charter. Talbot signed for the rest of the Compact behind Carl's back. Carl was the only one who said no." She drew a shuddering breath. "Two nights later, they came for him. And ten others. Everybody who'd been listening to those tapes you sent. Everybody who wouldn't register."

Ethan felt the cold go through him — colder than the night outside, colder than the snow.

"Where did they take them?"

"We don't know. Nobody knows." Jolene looked at him with red, exhausted eyes. "They just disappear. That's what people are saying now. In Brinkley, in Harlan's Crossing, in all of Kane's towns. You don't get arrested. You don't get a trial. You just — disappear. And nobody ever sees you again." She pressed her hand against her mouth. "Carl said to tell you. He said, *Tell Ethan.* That's the last thing he said before they hit him."

Ethan stood up slowly.

He did not say anything for a long moment. He looked at the wood stove, at the red glow behind the iron grate. He thought of Carl on his knees in the snow behind the gymnasium. *Is that — does that count?*

He thought of the sermon Carl must have heard, alone in his kitchen in Millbrook. The one that had made him stand up in the Grange Hall and say *no* in front of Marcus Kane and sixteen towns.

A tape that Ashwood had sent him.

“How did you get here?” he asked finally.

“We rode,” Danny said. “All night and all day. We went around the long way, by the river road, ’cause Kane’s got men on all the main roads now.” He looked up at Ethan. His face was twisted with fear and grief and something else — something hard and bright, like steel. “I read the Bible Noah gave me the whole time. Well — my mom read it. I held the reins.” He swallowed. “Psalm twenty-seven. ‘*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?*’” His voice cracked. “I kept saying it over and over, all the way here. I’m still scared, though.”

Ethan put his hand on the boy’s shoulder.

“So am I, Danny,” he said. “That’s all right. David was scared too when he wrote it.”

* * *

The Courthouse Command Center

December 31 — 9:00 a.m.

Daniel Mercer stood at the big county map on the east wall of the commissioners’ chamber with a red grease pencil in his hand, and he did not say anything for a long time.

Then he began to draw.

He drew a thick red line around Iron Ridge. Then another around Harlan’s Crossing, and Brinkley, and the six other towns Kane had taken before November. Then he drew around Carverton, and Oak Hill, and Danby Junction, and New Salem — the four towns of the old Compact that Ray Talbot had signed away. Then Millbrook. Then Galion and Crestline and Shelby and all the rest of the towns whose leaders had walked up the aisle of the Grange Hall and put their names on the charter.

Then he drew around Pike’s Mill.

When he was finished, he stepped back from the map, and the room was silent.

The red line started at Iron Ridge in the southwest and swept north through Millbrook and the old Compact towns, curved east through the farm country beyond the county line, and swung back south through Pike’s Mill to meet itself again.

In the middle of it, surrounded on every side, was a small, lonely patch of green.

Ashwood.

“That’s Phase Three,” Mercer said quietly. “I told you it was coming. I didn’t think it would come this fast.”

No one answered.

Around the long walnut table sat the people who had become, over eight months, the government of a free town: Mayor Brooks. Ethan. Jack. Sarah. Hal Whitaker. Rebecca. Samuel Graves. Rachel Monroe.

And at the end of the table, looking small and exhausted in a borrowed sweater, Danny Haskins and his mother.

Russ Keller's chair was empty. He had sent word that he was sick.

"Seventeen towns," Mercer said. "Thirty-four thousand people. Nine hundred fighters. Artillery. And now the official recognition of the International Relief Coordination Office." He tapped the patch of green with the grease pencil. "Ashwood is the only independent community left in seven counties. We're an island. And every road off this island runs through Kane's territory."

"The Mennonites," Rebecca said. "Pike's Mill. They didn't sign. They didn't swear the oath."

"They didn't have to," Mercer said. "They're paying Kane's tax and keeping the peace. That's enough for him. For now." He shook his head. "They won't fight for us, Rebecca. They won't fight for anybody. It's not in them."

"I know that," Rebecca said quietly. "I wasn't asking them to fight. I was just thinking — they're still sending us honey."

Mercer looked at her for a long moment. Then something that might have been respect crossed his lean face.

"Yes," he said. "They are."

Rachel Monroe had been sitting at the table with her satchel open in front of her, going through the Framework page by page. Now she looked up.

"Danny," she said. "The man in the gray coat at the Grange Hall. The one standing against the wall with the briefcase. Did your uncle say anything about him?"

Danny shook his head. His mother answered.

"Carl said there was a man there from the Relief Office," Jolene said. "Fair-haired. European-sounding. Carl said he never said a word the whole meeting. Just stood there and smiled." She frowned. "Carl said he'd seen him before, in Millbrook, with the forms. He called himself Sorensen, I think."

Rachel went very still.

Then she turned the Framework over to its final pages — a section Ethan had never seen her open, a list of names and titles in small, dense type. She ran her finger down the column.

She stopped.

"*Julian Sorensen,*" she read aloud. "*Regional Facilitator Designate, North American Sector. Phase Two and Phase Three implementation.*"

She looked up.

"He's on the list," she said. "He was on the list eleven weeks before the vanishing."

The room was silent.

"I want him," Jack Reynolds said, very quietly. "Carl. I want to go get him."

“We don’t know where he is,” Mercer said.

“Then we find out.” Jack turned from the window. His face was hard, but there was something new in his eyes — something that had not been there before the baptistery. “He stole medicine for us, Daniel. He stood up in front of Kane and sixteen towns and said no. Because of a tape *we* sent him.” He looked at Ethan. “We can’t leave him.”

“I know,” Ethan said.

“Then —”

“But we can’t get him *yet*,” Ethan said. His voice was very steady, though it cost him. “We don’t know where he is. We don’t know if he’s alive. We don’t have the men or the ammunition to go through Kane’s territory to find him. If we send a team out blind, we lose the team.” He looked around the table. “And if we lose the team, Ashwood loses the only thing standing between those guns and nine thousand people.”

Jack stared at him.

“So we just leave him?” he said hoarsely.

“No,” Ethan said. “We pray for him. And we find out where he is. And when we know — when we *know* — then we go.” He paused. “‘*Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them.*’ Hebrews thirteen. Samuel read it to me last night.”

Samuel Graves nodded slowly.

Jack held Ethan’s gaze for a long moment. Then he nodded once, sharply, and turned back to the window.

* * *

Iron Ridge — The Quarry

December 31 — 11:30 p.m.

The old Hollister limestone quarry lay a mile south of the Iron Ridge wall, at the end of a gravel haul road — a vast, stepped pit a quarter-mile wide, blasted a hundred and fifty feet down into the earth over a century of mining. At its bottom, beside a flooded sump black with ice, stood a cluster of cinderblock buildings that had once been the quarry’s machine shop, blasting magazine, and scale house.

The windows of the blasting magazine had been bricked up. The steel door had been fitted with a heavy hasp and padlock. Inside, in the absolute blackness, on a concrete floor strewn with straw, eleven people from Millbrook huddled together against the cold.

Carl Haskins sat with his back against the cinderblock wall and his arms around Pastor Ron Deckard’s shoulders, trying to keep the old man warm.

His nose was broken. Two of his ribs were cracked, maybe more. He had not eaten since the night they took him, except for a bucket of cold cornmeal mush they had shoved through the door the day before.

His hands were numb. He could hear Marcy Allen crying softly somewhere in the dark, and Frank Oyler's ragged breathing, and the rattle in Nancy Stroud's chest that got worse every hour.

He did not know what time it was. He did not know what day it was.

He was more afraid than he had ever been in his life.

And somehow — he did not understand how — he was not alone.

"Carl," Pastor Deckard whispered. The old man's voice was thin and shaky with cold. "Carl, are you awake?"

"I'm awake, Pastor."

"I think it might be New Year's Eve."

Carl almost laughed. It hurt his ribs. "Happy New Year."

"I've been thinking," Deckard whispered. "About Paul and Silas. In the jail at Philippi. You know that story?"

"No, sir." Carl hesitated. "I only been saved a month."

"They'd been beaten. Thrown in the inner prison. Feet in the stocks." The old man coughed. "And at midnight — the Bible says at midnight — they prayed, and sang praises unto God. And the prisoners heard them." He was quiet for a moment. "I think it might be about midnight, Carl."

Carl was silent for a long time.

"I don't know any songs, Pastor," he said finally. "Not church ones."

"That's all right," Ron Deckard whispered. "I'll teach you."

And in the blackness of the old blasting magazine at the bottom of the Hollister quarry, a seventy-year-old Methodist minister with pneumonia began, in a thin, cracked, trembling voice, to sing.

"*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound…*"

Marcy Allen stopped crying. After a moment, she joined him.

"*That saved a wretch like me…*"

Then Bill Stroud. Then Frank Oyler, off-key and hoarse.

Then Carl Haskins, who had never sung in church in his life, who did not know the words, who could only hum the tune through a broken nose and cracked ribs with tears running down his face in the dark.

"*I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind, but now I see.*"

Outside the steel door, a young guard from Harlan's Crossing named Evan Lowe stood in the frozen dark with his rifle in his hands and listened.

He did not move. He did not report it. He stood there in the snow at the bottom of the quarry until the singing stopped, and then for a long time afterward.

And then, very quietly, so that no one could possibly hear him, he whispered the last line back to the steel door.

* * *

Iron Ridge — The Manager's House

January 1 — 12:05 a.m.

Marcus Kane stood alone at the window of his study and looked out over his kingdom.

Seventeen towns. Thirty-four thousand people. Nine hundred fighters. A charter with a gold seal locked in the desk drawer behind him. A helicopter that would come back in two weeks with the first relief shipment — medicine and fuel and food, enough to make every town in the Alliance love him.

Everything he had built. Everything he had taken.

It was the first hour of a new year, and he had never been so powerful in his life.

Behind him, on the desk, the shortwave radio murmured softly. The voice from Brussels was delivering its New Year's message to the world — calm and warm and full of hope, as it always was.

"*…and so, as this terrible year comes to an end, let us look forward with courage to the one that is beginning. A year of healing. A year of rebuilding. A year in which the nations of the earth will at last lay down their weapons and come together as one human family. I promise you: before this new year is over, there will be peace. Real peace. Lasting peace. The kind of peace that humanity has dreamed of for ten thousand years…*"

Marcus turned it off.

He stood in the silence for a long time.

Then he heard it again, faintly, from down the hall. The soft murmur of his son's voice. Tyler, praying. He did it every night now, sometimes for an hour or more. He did not hide it anymore.

Marcus did not go to stop him. He had tried that once. It had not worked. He did not know what to do instead.

There was a knock at the study door. Kessler.

"Colonel. Report from the quarry. The prisoners from Millbrook." Kessler hesitated. "They were singing, sir. All night. Hymns. Lowe was on guard. He didn't report it until his relief came on."

Marcus did not turn from the window.

"Singing," he repeated.

"Yes, sir. *Amazing Grace*, Lowe says. Haskins too." Kessler shifted uncomfortably. "You want me to put a stop to it, sir?"

For a long moment, Marcus Kane said nothing.

He was thinking of a gravel lane in Pike's Mill, and an old man with pale blue eyes saying *I will pray for you.* Of his wife at the kitchen table at six in the morning with her Bible and her coffee. Of a

cassette tape that had appeared on his son's nightstand one day in December, with a label on it in black marker: *FREE. FOR ANYONE WHO WANTS TO KNOW WHAT HAPPENED.* He had not asked Tyler where it came from. He had been afraid of the answer.

How can she have been wrong?

"Colonel?"

"Let them sing," Marcus said finally. His voice was very quiet. "It won't change anything."

"Yes, sir." Kessler paused. "And Haskins, sir? What do you want done with him?"

Marcus turned from the window at last.

His face was cold and still again, composed, the face of the man who had stood at the head of the long table in the Grange Hall and held up the gold seal for sixteen towns to see.

"Leave him where he is," he said. "Walker will want him back. Walker's the kind of man who can't leave a friend behind." He crossed to the desk and picked up a sheet of paper and a pen. "That's useful."

He sat down and began to write.

To Ethan Walker and Mayor Daniel Brooks of the town of Ashwood:

As of this date, the town of Ashwood is the last community within the jurisdiction of the Regional Coordinating Authority for North-Central Ohio that has not joined the Iron Alliance.

I extend to you one final invitation. Ashwood may join the Alliance on the same terms as every other community, with full access to relief supplies and full protection under the Authority, provided that its leaders sign the charter, its residents register, and its churches cease the distribution of seditious recordings.

You have until February 1.

I am holding eleven citizens of Millbrook who chose disinformation over the safety of their neighbors. Among them is a man I believe you know. His welfare, and theirs, will depend on your answer.

I am not a cruel man, Walker. But I will do whatever is necessary to protect my people.

So will you. That is the only thing we have in common.

— M. J. Kane, Regional Coordinator

He signed it, folded it, and handed it to Kessler.

"Send a rider to Ashwood's south gate under a white flag," he said. "And tell Tolliver I want the guns ready to move to the Grange Hall by the first of February."

Kessler saluted and went out.

Marcus Kane sat alone at the desk in the lamplight.

Down the hall, his son was still praying.

And a mile to the south, at the bottom of a frozen quarry, eleven prisoners in the dark had begun, very softly, to sing again.

"*Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.*"

— Acts 4:12

* * *

END OF CHAPTER 8

PART THREE — AMERICA FALLS APART

* * *

CHAPTER 9

The Fall of Mansfield

"*How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! how is she become as a widow!*"

— Lamentations 1:1

* * *

Mercy General Hospital — Mansfield, Ohio

January 6 — 10:50 p.m.

The fire had reached the fourth floor.

Teresa Albright could hear it above her — a low, steady roar, like wind in a chimney, broken every few seconds by the crash of something collapsing. The smoke had started seeping down the stairwells an hour ago. Now it hung in a gray haze along the ceiling of the basement corridor, thickening by the minute, and the emergency lanterns strung along the walls glowed through it like lights in a fog.

"Move," she said. "Everybody move. Hold hands. Don't let go of each other. *Move.*"

Nineteen children moved.

They came down the corridor in a ragged line behind her, holding hands the way she had taught them, the big ones holding the little ones. The oldest was twelve. The youngest was a two-year-old boy named Mateo who rode on Tess's hip with his face buried in her neck, coughing. Behind the children came Dr. Warren Fitch, seventy-three years old, retired from pediatrics for a decade, pushing a hospital gurney loaded with everything he could grab from the basement pharmacy — boxes, bottles, bags of IV fluid, a battered defibrillator with no batteries. Behind him came two nurse's aides, a janitor named Reggie, and a woman from the neighborhood whose name Tess had never learned, carrying a newborn she had delivered in the stairwell three hours ago.

Twenty-five people.

That was all that was left of Mercy General Hospital.

Tess had worked at Mercy for nineteen years. Charge nurse in the emergency department for the last eleven. She had seen gunshot wounds and car wrecks and overdoses and a man who had fallen into a combine. She had worked through the tornado in 2011 and the flu season in 2018 and the entire pandemic. She had been standing at the nurses' station at 3:17 on that April afternoon when half her department disappeared — two doctors, four nurses, a respiratory therapist, and a chaplain who had been praying with a dying woman in Bay Six.

She had kept the hospital open for eight and a half months after that.

When the power failed, she had moved the patients to the basement. When the doctors left, she had begged Dr. Fitch out of retirement. When the gangs came looking for drugs in June, she had talked them down in the ambulance bay with nothing but a clipboard and a voice she had used on drunks for nineteen years. When the relief planes started coming at Christmas and the city went mad, she had turned the basement into an orphanage, because there was no one else to take the children whose parents had been killed in the fighting.

And now the hospital was burning, because somebody on the fourth floor had decided that a building with a red cross on it must have medicine worth stealing, and had set the fourth floor on fire when they didn't find any.

"Loading dock," Reggie called from the front of the line. He had a flashlight in one hand and a fire axe in the other. "Door's clear. Truck's still there."

Tess pushed through the heavy steel door into the loading bay.

The cold hit her like a slap. And then the sound.

Mansfield was dying all around her.

She could hear it in every direction — the flat crack of rifles, the hammering of automatic weapons, the deep thud of something heavier far to the north. She could hear screaming, faint and far away. She could hear engines racing and glass breaking and, somewhere close, a woman's voice calling a name over and over. And above it all, the fire. Not just the hospital. The whole sky to the north and east was glowing a dull, pulsing orange, and the smoke rose up into it in great black columns, lit from beneath, like the pillars of some burning temple.

Downtown was on fire. The Carrousel District. The old reformatory on the hill. The neighborhoods along Park Avenue where she had grown up.

All of it.

"Tess." Dr. Fitch had stopped beside her with the gurney. His face was gray in the firelight. "Tess, where are we going?"

She had been asking herself that question for three days.

The truck was a white Ford box van with *Mercy General Transport* painted on the side. It had a quarter tank of diesel that Reggie had siphoned from an abandoned school bus two weeks ago, saved for exactly this. A quarter tank would get them maybe sixty miles.

Not to Columbus. Columbus was gone.

Not north to Kane's towns. She had heard what happened to people in Kane's towns who didn't do what they were told.

Not to the relief camps the Office had set up on the western edge of the city. She had seen the lines at those camps. She had seen the forms. She had seen what happened to people who got to the front of the line and couldn't answer the questions.

There was only one place she could think of.

"Ashwood," she said.

Dr. Fitch stared at her. "Ashwood? The little farm town up north? Why on earth —"

"Because Sarah Collins is there." Tess shifted Mateo on her hip. "She worked under me for four years in the ED before everything happened. Best young doctor I ever trained. She went home to Ashwood in April. I've heard things on the road — refugees talking. They say Ashwood took in eight hundred people from Ontario in November. They say they have a clinic in the high school. They say the churches are full." She swallowed. "They say they don't make you fill out forms."

Fitch looked at her for a long moment. Then at the nineteen children huddled in the loading bay behind her, coughing in the smoke.

"Then let's go to Ashwood," he said.

They loaded the children into the back of the van, packing them in on blankets between the boxes from the pharmacy. The woman with the newborn rode up front. Reggie drove. Tess sat in the back with Mateo in her lap and the children pressed against her on every side, and held on.

The van pulled out of the loading dock and turned east, away from the fire, onto a street Tess had driven ten thousand times in her life and no longer recognized.

Behind them, with a sound like the end of the world, the roof of Mercy General Hospital fell in.

Tess did not look back.

She held Mateo against her chest and did the only thing she had left to do. She had not done it since she was a girl in Sunday school at the Lutheran church on Diamond Street, fifty years ago. She did not remember the words very well.

"*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want…*"

Nineteen children, pressed against her in the dark, listened.

* * *

Ashwood — First Baptist Church Bell Tower

January 7 — 5:30 a.m.

The glow on the western horizon had been there for eleven nights.

Noah Simmons had seen it first, on the night after Christmas, from the new lookout post in the bell tower of First Baptist — a faint smudge of orange light low in the sky to the southwest, like a sunrise in the wrong place. He had reported it to Jack. Jack had climbed up with his binoculars and looked at it for a long time and said nothing.

Every night since, it had been brighter.

Now, in the black hour before dawn, Ethan Walker stood in the belfry beneath the silent iron bell with Rebecca Whitfield beside him and watched the western sky burn.

It was not a smudge anymore. It stretched along the horizon for miles — a wide, pulsing band of orange and red, flickering, rising and falling, lighting the undersides of the low winter clouds from below. Even from twenty-five miles away, they could see the columns of smoke, darker than the night, climbing into the sky.

“Mansfield,” Rebecca said softly.

“Mansfield.”

Neither of them spoke for a long time.

Ethan had been to Mansfield a thousand times. Everyone in Ashwood had. It was the big city — forty-seven thousand people, the county seat of Richland County, forty minutes down Route 13. It was where you went for a real hospital, a real mall, a real movie theater. It was where his high school football team had played in the regional playoffs his senior year, and lost, and Carl Haskins had cried on the bus all the way home. It was where he had bought Emily’s engagement ring, at a little jeweler’s shop downtown on Main Street, with three months of a rookie cop’s salary.

It was burning.

“Daniel Mercer left four days ago,” Ethan said. “He said he had to see it for himself. He said something was happening there, something big, and we needed to know what.” He paused. “He was supposed to be back yesterday.”

Rebecca said nothing. She put her hand on his arm.

Below them, the town was beginning to stir. Lanterns appearing in windows. Smoke rising from chimneys. The first volunteers of the morning watch walking toward the checkpoints with their rifles on their shoulders. The ration line forming outside the Rialto. Ordinary things. The small, stubborn rhythms of a town that refused to die.

Rebecca had her father’s Bible open in her other hand. She had been reading it by lantern light when Ethan came up the ladder. Now she looked down at the page and read aloud, very quietly, as if to herself.

"*And the kings of the earth, who have committed fornication and lived deliciously with her, shall bewail her, and lament for her, when they shall see the smoke of her burning, Standing afar off for the fear of her torment, saying, Alas, alas that great city… for in one hour is thy judgment come.*"

She closed the book.

"Revelation eighteen," she said. "It's about Babylon. Not Mansfield." She looked out at the burning horizon. "But I keep thinking about it anyway. *Standing afar off.* That's what we're doing, isn't it? Standing afar off, watching a city burn."

"There's nothing else we can do."

"I know." She was quiet for a moment. "Dad used to say that every city in the Bible that fell, fell for the same reason. Not because of armies. Because of what was inside it. Pride. Greed. Violence. Everyone doing what was right in his own eyes." She shook her head. "I don't think Mansfield was any worse than Ashwood. I think it was just bigger. More people to be afraid. More things to fight over."

"That's what worries me," Ethan said.

Far below, at the south gate, a radio crackled. Then another. Ethan heard running footsteps on the frozen street.

His own radio came to life on his hip.

"*South gate to Walker. South gate to Walker.*" It was Luis Ortega, and his voice was tight. "*Commander, Mercer's back. He's hurt. And there's — sir, you need to see the road.*"

* * *

South Gate, Ashwood

6:10 a.m.

Daniel Mercer was sitting on the running board of a pickup truck inside the gate with a blanket around his shoulders and a field dressing on his left arm, soaked through with blood. His face was black with soot. His beard was singed on one side. There was a look in his eyes that Ethan had never seen there before — a flat, empty, thousand-yard stare, the look of a man who had seen too much in too short a time and had not yet found a place to put it.

Sarah was kneeling in front of him, unwrapping the dressing. She looked up as Ethan came through the gap between the buses.

"Grazed," she said shortly. "Bullet. Took a chunk out of the triceps. He'll live."

"I told her that," Mercer said. His voice was hoarse. "She didn't believe me."

"You also told me you were fine, and you've lost a pint of blood." Sarah pressed a clean pad against the wound. "Hold still."

Ethan crouched beside him. "Daniel. What happened?"

Mercer didn't answer. He lifted his good arm and pointed down Route 13.

Ethan stood up and looked.

The road was full.

Not the way it had been in November, when Isaiah Freeman's column had come up the highway in a single silent line. This was different. The road was full from ditch to ditch and beyond — people spilling out across the frozen fields on both sides, over the fences, through the tree lines, down the ditches. They were not walking in any kind of order. They were not walking in any kind of silence. They came in knots and clusters and scattered handfuls, some running, some stumbling, some pushing carts, some carrying nothing at all. Ethan could hear them from the gate — shouting, crying, calling names, arguing. A baby screaming. A man cursing at a stalled car. A woman's voice, over and over: *Has anyone seen my son? Has anyone seen Jacob? He's nine, he's wearing a red coat —*

He could not see the end of them.

"How many?" he said.

"Thousands," Mercer said behind him. "Tens of thousands, on every road out of the city. This is just the edge of it." He closed his eyes. "Mansfield's gone, Ethan. The whole city. It fell last night."

* * *

He told them in the guardhouse, over a cup of chicory he did not drink, with Sarah stitching his arm by lantern light and the noise of the crowd outside the gate rising and falling like surf.

Ethan, Jack, Brooks, Rebecca, Rachel, and Hal Whitaker listened. None of them interrupted.

"You remember the planes," Mercer said. "The Global Health Initiative. The ones that came to Millbrook in December." He looked at the cup in his hands. "They came to Mansfield too. The week before Christmas. Six of them. Biggest relief drop in the state."

"We heard," Brooks said.

"What you didn't hear is who they dropped it to." Mercer's voice was flat. "Mansfield never had a real government after April. The mayor fled the first week. The city council fell apart. What was left was a patchwork. Neighborhoods. Churches. Gangs. And the biggest faction was something calling itself the Richland Guard — about four hundred men. Leftover cops, sheriff's deputies, a few National Guard who didn't go to Kane. They held downtown and the hospital district. They weren't good, but they weren't monsters. They kept the peace, mostly."

"And the others?"

"The others were everyone else. And the biggest of *them* was a coalition of gangs and raiders that had been living off the refugee camps along the interstate since summer." Mercer looked at Ethan. "Their leader's name was Boyd Strickland."

The room went very still.

"The man from the gate," Jack said quietly. "November."

“The same.” Mercer nodded grimly. “After you turned him away, he went back to Mansfield. He recruited. By Christmas he had seven or eight hundred men. They called themselves the Reapers.” He paused. “And then the Office came, with its planes and its satellite phones and its forms. And the Office did what the Office does. It looked for the most organized authority in the city, and it registered them, and it dropped six planeloads of medicine and food and fuel into the Richland Guard’s depot downtown.”

Rachel Monroe had gone very pale.

“They created a prize,” she said slowly. “In the middle of a starving city. And gave it to one side.”

“Exactly.” Mercer looked at her. “Strickland attacked the depot on December twenty-sixth. The Richland Guard held it. Barely. Then they counterattacked. Then the neighborhoods started choosing sides — the ones that had registered and were getting relief, and the ones that hadn’t and weren’t. Then the churches started getting burned, because somebody spread a rumor that the churches were hoarding food from the airdrops.” His jaw tightened. “Twelve days, Ethan. Twelve days of street fighting. House to house. Block by block. I’ve been in Fallujah. I’ve been in Mosul. I have never seen anything like it. Americans. Neighbors. Men who used to coach Little League together, killing each other in the street over pallets of antibiotics with a gold seal on them.”

Nobody said anything.

“Yesterday afternoon,” Mercer went on, very quietly, “the Richland Guard ran out of ammunition. The Reapers broke through into the hospital district. They set Mercy General on fire looking for drugs. They set half of downtown on fire looking for anything. By midnight the Guard was finished. Strickland was standing on the steps of the old courthouse on Park Avenue, and the whole city was burning around him.”

He set down the cup.

“And at four o’clock this morning,” he said, “Marcus Kane’s Iron Alliance came into Mansfield from the south with nine hundred men and two armored trucks. Strickland’s men were drunk. Exhausted. Out of ammunition themselves. Kane rolled over them in about three hours.” He paused. “I watched it from a church steeple on the east side. Right before somebody shot at me.”

“Kane took Mansfield,” Hal Whitaker said slowly.

“Kane *saved* Mansfield,” Mercer corrected. “That’s what they’ll say. That’s what the man on the radio will say tonight. The Iron Alliance restored order to a city torn apart by lawless gangs. The Office will send in the helicopters with more medicine, and it’ll all go through Kane, and every survivor in the city who registers will get fed. And the ones who don’t —” He shrugged. “Well. You saw Millbrook.”

“And Strickland?” Jack asked.

“Hanging from the pedestrian bridge over Park Avenue,” Mercer said. “Along with about forty of his Reapers. Kane had it done at dawn, in front of the survivors. I saw it through my scope.” He closed his eyes. “The crowd cheered.”

Rebecca put her hand over her mouth.

For a long moment, the only sound in the guardhouse was the crackle of the stove and the endless noise of the crowd outside.

“It was the relief,” Rachel said at last. Her voice was barely a whisper. “The planes didn’t cause the fighting. But they made it worse. They made it *certain.* They picked a side in a starving city and gave that side everything, and made everyone else desperate enough to kill for it.” She looked at Mercer. “And then when the city had torn itself apart — when both sides were broken — the Office’s own man walked in and picked up the pieces.”

“*Phase Three,*” Mercer said.

“It’s in the Framework.” Rachel’s hands were shaking. “Appendix D. *Regional destabilization may be accelerated by the selective provision of relief to preferred authorities. Resulting conflicts will create conditions favorable to consolidation.*” She looked around the room. “I read it a hundred times. I thought it was just — theory. Bureaucratic language.”

“It wasn’t theory,” Mercer said. “I watched it happen.”

* * *

Ashwood — Outlying Farms

January 7–10

They came to Ashwood by the thousands.

Not all at once. Not in a single column that could be counted at the gate. They came the way water comes when a dam breaks — spreading out across the land, finding every low place, every gap, every road and lane and field. They came down Route 13 and County Road 12 and the old Pike’s Mill road. They came across the frozen fields and through the woodlots and along the creek beds. Some of them came to the gates. Most of them did not.

Most of them came to the farms.

On the night of the seventh, a band of eleven men broke into the Marsh farm on Township Road 9, two miles outside the defense perimeter. They were not raiders. They were not Reapers. They were a family — three brothers from Mansfield and their sons and cousins, who had walked for two days without food and had seen the lights of the farmhouse from the road. They came into the barn looking for grain. Ed Marsh came out onto the porch with his shotgun. Somebody panicked.

Ed Marsh lived. So did his wife. One of the brothers from Mansfield did not.

On the night of the eighth, someone broke into the Lindquist smokehouse and took every ham and side of bacon the old veterinarian had put up for the winter. On the morning of the ninth, Hal Whitaker found two of his Belgian draft horses gone from the pasture and a trail of hoofprints leading west across the snow. By the afternoon of the ninth, every family on every farm outside the perimeter had stopped sleeping at night.

And in town, the fear spread.

It spread from the ration line to the tool library, from the church steps to the barbershop that had become a gathering place for old men with nothing else to do. It spread through the kitchens of the refugee families who had come from Ontario in November and now worked on Ashwood's farms — and who had, some of them, family in Mansfield they had not heard from in weeks. It spread through the youth group, where teenagers who had been copying Pastor Whitfield's tapes in the church basement began asking Noah whether it was true that Kane was going to come next.

On the evening of the ninth, Ethan walked past the Rialto and saw that someone had spray-painted new words on the plywood beneath the marquee, in red, dripping letters:

SEAL THE GATES

Beneath it, in smaller letters, in different paint:

SIGN KANE'S CHARTER — BEFORE WE BURN TOO

He stood on the sidewalk and looked at it for a long time.

Then he went to find Russ Keller.

* * *

He found him at the co-op, alone in the old manager's office with the ration ledgers spread out across his desk and a kerosene lamp burning low. Keller had been sick — or said he had — for more than a week. He looked it. His heavy face was pale and puffy, and there were dark circles under his eyes, and his hands, when he pushed the ledgers aside, were not quite steady.

"Walker," he said. He didn't get up.

"Russ." Ethan stood in the doorway. "You feeling better?"

"Some." Keller rubbed his face. "Flu, I guess. Came on hard. Sarah said to stay in bed." He shrugged. "You here about the paint on the Rialto?"

"I'm here because I want to know what you think," Ethan said. "Honestly. No speeches."

Keller looked at him for a long moment. Then he laughed — a short, tired, humorless sound.

"You really want to know what I think?" He leaned back in his chair. "I think Mansfield had forty-seven thousand people and a real hospital and four hundred armed men, and it's gone. Gone in twelve days. I think Kane has seventeen towns and nine hundred fighters and now a whole city, and the Relief Office in his back pocket. I think we've got two hundred and sixty men with less than sixty rounds apiece, and a town full of starving people, and every farm outside the perimeter getting robbed every night by folks from Mansfield who'd kill us for a sack of cornmeal." He spread his hands. "And I think we have twenty-two days until Kane's deadline. And I think when it passes, he's going to do to us exactly what he did to Strickland. Only there's not going to be anybody left to cheer."

He was quiet for a moment.

"That's what I think, Walker. You asked."

Ethan came into the office and sat down in the chair across from him.

“And you think we should sign,” he said.

“I think we should *live*.” Keller’s voice cracked. “I think my grandkids should live. I’ve got three of them, you know. Six, four, and eighteen months. My daughter’s kids. Her husband vanished. She’s living with me and my wife in the house on Poplar.” He looked away. “I lie awake at night and do the math. Sixty rounds a man. Two howitzers. Nine hundred fighters. And every way I work it, my grandkids end up in a ditch.” He swallowed. “I don’t care about seals and forms and Bible prophecies, Walker. I care about that.”

Ethan said nothing for a long time.

He looked at Russ Keller — heavy, frightened, sweating in the lamplight, a man who had run a grain co-op for twenty years and never once imagined he would have to choose between his grandchildren and his town. He thought about the empty chair at the table on New Year’s Eve. The missing tape from the footlocker. Mercer’s voice on the rooftop: *In my line of work, you learn to notice who leaves the room first.*

He did not know. He could not know. Not yet.

And he found, sitting there, that he did not want to know. He wanted Russ Keller to be exactly what he seemed — a frightened grandfather doing arithmetic in the dark. Nothing more.

“Russ,” he said quietly. “I’ve got something I want to read you. Would you let me?”

Keller looked at him warily. Then he shrugged.

Ethan took Emily’s small green New Testament out of his coat pocket and opened it to a page he had marked that morning.

“‘*Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.*’” He looked up. “John fourteen. Jesus said that the night before He was betrayed. He knew exactly what was coming. He knew one of the men sitting at that table was going to sell Him out. And He said, *Let not your heart be troubled.*”

Keller was very still.

“I’m not going to tell you not to be scared,” Ethan said. “I’m scared too. For my town. For your grandkids. For everybody.” He closed the book. “But I’ve watched what happens to the people who sign that charter, Russ. Carl signed nothing, and they took him. Millbrook signed, and eleven people disappeared anyway. Mansfield took the relief, and the relief burned it to the ground.” He leaned forward. “There’s no safe side, Russ. There’s only the true one.”

For a long moment, Russ Keller did not move.

Then he looked down at his desk. At the ledgers. At his own unsteady hands.

“You sound like Rebecca,” he said at last. His voice was very low.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It wasn’t meant as one.” But there was no anger in it. Only something tired and heavy and sad. Keller rubbed his eyes. “Go home, Walker. I’ve got rations to count.”

Ethan stood up. At the door, he paused.

“Russ,” he said. “If you ever need to talk. About anything. My door’s open.”

Keller did not look up.

“Good night, Walker,” he said.

* * *

South Gate, Ashwood

January 10 — 3:15 p.m.

The decision was made in the guardhouse, the same way it had been made in November. But it was not the same decision.

“We can’t take them,” Hal Whitaker said. He said it quietly, without any of Keller’s anger, and with tears standing in his eyes. “Not this time. Not thousands. Not with the farms getting robbed and the food running out. The land can’t hold them. The town can’t hold them. I’m sorry. God forgive me, I’m sorry. But we can’t.”

Nobody argued with him. Not even Rebecca.

In the end, they did the only thing they could think of.

They fed them at the gate.

Donna Pierce and the church women set up six enormous iron kettles on wood fires outside the south gate, in the broad gravel apron in front of the school buses. They made soup — thin soup, bean soup, corn soup, soup made from bones that had already been boiled twice. They made it all day and all night. Every person who came up Route 13 to Ashwood’s gate got a bowl of soup, a cup of boiled water with honey in it, a blanket if there were any left, and a prayer if they wanted one.

And then they were asked to move on.

Not turned away. Not threatened. Asked. Ethan stood at the gate himself, hour after hour, and told them as gently as he knew how. *We’re sorry. We don’t have room. We don’t have food. We’re barely surviving ourselves. We’ll feed you today. We’ll pray for you. But we can’t let you in.*

Some of them wept. Some of them cursed him. One man spat in his face, and Ethan wiped it off with his sleeve and said, *I’m sorry*, and meant it.

And most of them — this was the part that broke his heart — most of them simply nodded, and finished their soup, and walked on.

North, toward Millbrook. Toward Ray Talbot and the Northern District of the Iron Alliance, where there were relief supplies and a registration office at the fire hall and a man with a satellite phone who would give them bread if they gave him their names.

“They’re going to Kane,” Rebecca said. She was standing beside Ethan at the kettles on the second evening, ladling soup, watching a young family — a father and mother and two small girls — walk away up Route 39 toward the north. “All of them. They’re going to Kane.”

“I know.”

“We’re sending them to Kane.”

“We’re not sending them anywhere, Rebecca. There’s nowhere else to go.” Ethan’s voice was rough. “He owns every road. He owns every town. He owns the relief. The only place in seven counties that isn’t his is right here, and we can’t hold ten thousand more people.” He shook his head. “This is how it works. Mercer told us. Make them desperate enough, and they’ll walk into the system on their own. They’ll thank him for it.”

Rebecca watched the young family until they disappeared into the dusk.

“‘*And I saw, and behold a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand,*’” she said softly. “‘*And I heard a voice… say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny.*’” She set down her ladle. “Revelation six. The third seal. Famine. Food measured out and sold at a price.” She shook her head. “Dad’s notebook says the price isn’t money. It’s allegiance.”

Ethan looked at her. He didn’t say anything. He didn’t have anything to say.

* * *

South Gate, Ashwood

January 10 — 9:40 p.m.

The white van came up Route 13 just after dark, driving slowly, with only its parking lights on, weaving between the knots of refugees on the road. It had *Mercy General Transport* painted on the side, half-hidden beneath a layer of soot and road grime. It stopped at the edge of the lantern light in front of the soup kettles, and a stocky gray-haired woman in a filthy nurse’s jacket climbed down from the back with a toddler on her hip.

She walked straight up to the gate, past the kettles, past the line, past Donna Pierce and the church women, and stopped in front of Luis Ortega, who was standing guard with his rifle.

“My name is Teresa Albright,” she said. “I was the charge nurse of the emergency department at Mercy General Hospital in Mansfield. I have nineteen orphaned children in that van, a pediatrician, two nurse’s aides, a janitor, a woman with a four-day-old baby, and every drug I could carry out of a burning building.” She shifted the toddler on her hip. “And I need to see Dr. Sarah Collins.”

* * *

Sarah came running.

Ethan had never seen her run before. Not like that — not with her coat flapping open and her hair coming loose from its tie and her face wide open with something he did not have a word for. She came down Route 13 from the fairgrounds clinic at a dead sprint and pushed through the gap between the school buses, and stopped.

For a moment, the two women simply looked at each other in the lantern light — the young doctor from Ashwood and the gray-haired charge nurse from Mansfield, who had worked side by side for four years in a busy emergency department in a world that no longer existed.

Then Sarah said, “Tess,” in a voice that cracked in half.

And Teresa Albright handed the toddler to Luis Ortega, and opened her arms, and Sarah walked into them and wept like a child.

* * *

The nineteen children were admitted that night. Nobody argued. Not Hal, not Keller, not anyone. The council met in the guardhouse for exactly four minutes and voted unanimously, and Donna Pierce went home and opened up her own house on Maple Avenue, because she said it was too big for one widow and it was about time it had some noise in it again.

Dr. Warren Fitch went to the clinic with Sarah and was put to work before he had taken off his coat. Reggie the janitor went to Jack, who took one look at the fire axe and the way he carried it and assigned him to the south gate. The two aides went to the fairgrounds barns with Isaiah Freeman. The woman with the newborn, whose name turned out to be Angela, went to the Kimble house on Chestnut Street, where Walt had been living alone since Martha died, and where — Walt said gruffly — there was a perfectly good crib in the attic that nobody was using.

And the pharmacy boxes from Mercy General went to the supply room at the high school, where Sarah and Tess sat up until three in the morning on overturned buckets, sorting through them by lantern light.

It was not much. Antibiotics — some. Pain medication — a little. Bandages, sutures, IV tubing, a surgical kit, a box of scalpel blades. A bottle of epinephrine. Three vials of insulin, which Sarah put straight into the cooler with Ellen Brooks’s supply without saying a word.

It was not much. But it was more than they had had yesterday.

Near three o’clock, Tess set down the box she was sorting and sat back against the cinderblock wall and closed her eyes.

“I thought you were dead,” she said. “When you didn’t come back to work after the vanishing. I thought maybe you’d gone too.”

“I thought about it,” Sarah said. “Not going with them. The other thing.” She was quiet for a moment. “The first week. Before I found the Bible.”

Tess opened her eyes and looked at her.

“You found God,” she said. “Linda Castellano’s God.”

“I found Linda Castellano’s God.” Sarah nodded. “Or He found me. I’m still not sure which.”

Tess was silent for a long time. The lantern hissed between them.

“On the way out of Mansfield,” she said finally, “in the van, with the kids, with the city burning behind us — I prayed. First time in fifty years. The Twenty-third Psalm. I didn’t remember all of it. I kept

getting stuck on the part about the valley of the shadow of death." She laughed shakily. "And the kids — the kids started saying it with me. Some of them knew it better than I did. Somebody's grandmother must have taught them." She wiped her eyes. "Nineteen kids in the back of a hospital van, saying the Twenty-third Psalm while Mansfield burned."

Sarah reached over and took her hand.

"'*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,*'" she said softly. "'*And I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.*' That's the end. You didn't get stuck. You just hadn't gotten there yet."

Tess Albright looked down at their joined hands. And then, for the first time in nineteen years that Sarah had known her, the toughest charge nurse in Richland County put her face in her hands and cried.

* * *

Ashwood — The Courthouse Roof

January 10 — 11:55 p.m.

The glow over Mansfield was fading.

Ethan stood on the courthouse roof with Jack and Mercer and watched it — no longer a band of flame across the horizon, but a dull, smoldering red smear, sinking slowly into darkness. The fires were burning out. There was nothing left to burn.

Mercer's arm was in a sling. Jack had his binoculars. None of them spoke for a long time.

Then the radio in Jack's hand crackled, and the voice came through the static — the one they had all been waiting for, whether they admitted it or not.

"*…and tonight my heart is with the people of Mansfield, Ohio. A great American city, destroyed not by any foreign enemy, but by its own divisions. By lawlessness. By factions. By men who put their own greed above the welfare of their neighbors.*"

The voice paused. When it went on, it was full of grief, and compassion, and a terrible, reasonable sorrow.

"*Mansfield is a warning to us all. This is what happens when we refuse to come together. This is the price of division. And so I say again, to every community in North America that still stands apart, that still clings to the old suspicions and the old hatreds — the time for division is over. Come home. Join your neighbors. Accept the help that is offered. Before it is too late, and what happened to Mansfield happens to you.*"

"*I promise you peace. I promise you safety. I promise you a place in the new world. You need only take my hand.*"

Jack switched it off.

In the silence that followed, Mercer laughed — a low, bitter, exhausted sound.

"He burned the city," he said. "And now he's using the ashes to sell the next one."

Ethan did not answer. He was looking southwest, toward the fading glow, and toward the darkness beyond it, where Iron Ridge lay, and Marcus Kane, and two howitzers waiting under tarps behind a Grange hall six miles away.

Twenty-one days.

He thought of the young family walking north up Route 39 in the dusk. Of the eleven men who had broken into Ed Marsh's barn for a sack of grain, and the one who had died there. Of Boyd Strickland hanging from a bridge on Park Avenue while a crowd cheered. Of Russ Keller in the lamplight, saying *my grandkids end up in a ditch.* Of nineteen children in the back of a hospital van, saying the Twenty-third Psalm while the city burned behind them.

"'*When ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies,*'" he said quietly, "'*then know that the desolation thereof is nigh. Then let them which are in Judaea flee to the mountains.*'"

Jack lowered the binoculars and looked at him.

"Luke twenty-one," Ethan said. "Rebecca read it to me this morning." He looked out at the dark. "The thing is, Jack — there aren't any mountains in Ohio."

Jack Reynolds was quiet for a long moment.

"Then I guess we stand," he said.

"I guess we stand."

Mercer shifted his arm in the sling and looked at both of them with something that might, in another man, have been faith. In Daniel Mercer, it looked more like respect.

"You two are going to get everybody killed," he said.

"Probably," Ethan agreed.

"I'm staying anyway." Mercer turned back to the fading glow on the horizon. "Somebody's got to write it down."

Far to the southwest, the last fires of Mansfield flickered once, and went out.

"*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea.*"

— Psalm 46:1–2

* * *

END OF CHAPTER 9

CHAPTER 10

Lines in the Sand

"*Except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.*"

— Psalm 127:1

* * *

The Courthouse Command Center

January 12 — 6:00 a.m.

Jack Reynolds had not slept.

He stood at the big county map on the east wall of the commissioners' chamber in the gray light before dawn, with a mug of cold chicory in one hand and a red grease pencil in the other, and he had been standing there since midnight. The map was no longer the neat hand-drawn chart it had been in October. It was covered now in lines and circles and arrows and numbers, layer on layer, some erased and redrawn three or four times, until the paper had worn thin in places and the whole thing looked like the scribbled notebook of a madman.

To Jack, it looked like the only thing standing between nine thousand people and a mass grave.

He heard the door open behind him and did not turn. He knew the footsteps.

"You look terrible," Ethan said.

"Thanks."

"Sarah says if you don't sleep, she's going to sedate you."

"Sarah says that to everybody." Jack finally turned around. His eyes were bloodshot, and the lines around his mouth had deepened into grooves. "Twenty days, Ethan. Kane's deadline is twenty days out. And when it passes, he's going to pull the tarps off those guns behind the Grange Hall, and he's going to start shelling this town, and then he's going to come in behind the shells with nine hundred men." He set down the mug. "We've been playing defense like a small town. Checkpoints. A couple of towers. Volunteers standing around fire barrels. That was fine for raiders. It was fine for Strickland. It's not going to be fine for Kane."

"So what do we do?"

Jack turned back to the map.

"We stop being a town," he said. "And we start being a fortress."

* * *

By seven o'clock, the command center was full.

Mayor Brooks sat at the head of the walnut table, polishing his glasses. Ethan sat beside him. Hal Whitaker, Sarah, Rebecca, and Samuel Graves filled the chairs along one side. Daniel Mercer stood by the window with his arm still in a sling. Luis Ortega, who had become Jack's second-in-command over the winter without anyone quite deciding it, stood at Jack's elbow with a clipboard. And at the far end of the table, looking pale and tired but upright, sat Russ Keller.

Jack did not waste time.

"Three rings," he said, and drew them on the map in red — three rough, uneven circles, one inside the other, with the courthouse at the center.

"The outer ring is the farms." He tapped the widest circle, which swept out two and three miles from the edge of town in every direction, taking in the Whitaker place, the Graves farm, the Voss dairy, the Lindquist and Marsh and Hartman farms, and thirty-odd others. "We can't wall them. There's too much ground. But we can watch them. Every farm gets a watch post — a hayloft, a silo, a windmill tower, whatever's highest. Two people, day and night, with a rifle and a bell. We'll have mounted patrols riding the roads between them. Four riders each, on a rotation. If anybody comes at the farms — raiders, refugees, Kane's scouts — the patrols respond, and the bells ring, and the next farm over hears it and rings its own. Ring to ring, all the way back to town."

"Bells," Hal said. "Like the old days."

"Like the old days." Jack nodded. "Church bells, dinner bells, school bells, fire bells — every bell in the county. Luis has already got the youth group collecting them. Three rings means raiders. Continuous ringing means a real attack. Everybody learns the code."

He moved to the second ring — a tighter circle about a mile out from the courthouse, where the farmland met the edge of town.

"The middle ring is the roads. There are fourteen roads into Ashwood, counting the township roads and the farm lanes. Right now we've got four of them blocked with checkpoints. By the end of the month, I want all fourteen closed." He tapped the map at each spot as he spoke. "Route 13 south. Route 39 north. County Road 12. County Road 7. Township 9. Township 14. All of them. We use whatever we can find. Overturned grain trucks. School buses. Felled trees. The concrete barriers from the county highway yard. Hal's crew is going to cut the old railroad spur behind the elevator and weld the rails into tank traps — Kane's got two armored trucks, and I'd like them to stay on the other side of the line." He looked around the table. "Every roadblock gets a bunker behind it. Sandbags, railroad ties, dirt. Every bunker gets a field of fire."

"Fourteen roads," Keller said quietly. "That's a lot of men."

"It's a lot of men," Jack agreed. "That's why the third ring is the most important." He drew the smallest circle, tight around the heart of town. "The inner ring is Ashwood itself. If Kane breaks the middle ring — and he might — this is where we hold. Every street leading into the courthouse square gets barricaded. Every intersection gets a strongpoint. Snipers in the grain elevator, the bell tower, the water tower, the courthouse roof. The high school gets fortified as a hospital and a last redoubt. And every church basement in town gets turned into a shelter."

He put down the grease pencil.

“That’s the plan,” he said. “Three lines. Watch the farms. Hold the roads. Defend the town.” He looked around the table. “We’re going to need every able-bodied person in Ashwood to build it. And we’re going to need to change the way this town lives.”

* * *

“Change how?” Brooks asked.

Jack looked at Luis Ortega. Ortega read from his clipboard.

“Curfew, sunset to sunrise, for everyone except patrols and medical,” he said. “Movement passes for anyone traveling between the farms and town. Checkpoints on every street into the inner ring. Mandatory militia service for every able-bodied man and woman between sixteen and sixty — not just volunteers anymore. Training every day. A registry of every firearm and every round of ammunition in town, so we know what we’ve got.” He paused. “And searches.”

The room went quiet.

“Searches,” Brooks repeated.

“Of homes and farms. For hoarded ammunition, weapons, fuel, and food.” Ortega’s voice was steady, but he did not look at anyone. “We know there are people in Ashwood sitting on guns and rounds and gasoline they haven’t turned in. Some of them are sitting on food, too, while their neighbors stand in the ration line. We can’t afford that anymore.”

Hal Whitaker let out a low breath. Rebecca looked down at her hands.

And Daniel Brooks took off his glasses, and set them down very carefully on the walnut table, and did not speak for a long time.

“Jack,” he said finally. “May I ask you something?”

“Go ahead.”

“What was the first thing Marcus Kane did when he took Harlan’s Crossing?”

Jack’s jaw tightened. He did not answer.

“He registered every resident,” Brooks said quietly. “He took an inventory of every gun and every round. He imposed a curfew. He conscripted the young men. And he searched every house for hoarding.” He looked around the table. “It’s in the proclamation. I’ve read it fifty times. *All firearms beyond those necessary for hunting shall be surrendered. All men between the ages of eighteen and forty-five shall be subject to service.* All of it.”

“That’s different,” Jack said.

“Is it?” Brooks leaned forward. “I’m not saying you’re wrong, Jack. God knows you’re not wrong about the danger. I’ve seen the map. I know what those guns can do.” He rubbed his eyes. “But we voted in November not to put our names on a list. Six thousand people stood in line in the cold to cast

that vote. And now, two months later, we're going to make a list of every gun in town and search people's houses?"

"Kane's going to do a lot worse than make a list if he gets in here," Jack said.

"I know." Brooks's voice was very quiet. "I know he is. But I've been thinking about this ever since the vote. Every man who ever became a tyrant told himself he was only doing it to protect his people. Kane said it to Sorensen. He said it in the Grange Hall. *I will do whatever is necessary to protect my people.*" He looked up at Jack. "I don't want to wake up one morning and find out that the only difference between Ashwood and Iron Ridge is which side of the county line we're on."

Nobody spoke.

It was Samuel Graves who finally broke the silence. The old farmer shifted in his chair and rested both hands on his cane.

"Seems to me," he said slowly, "you're both right. Again." A faint smile. "Getting to be a habit around this table."

"Samuel —" Brooks began.

"Hear me out, Daniel." Samuel turned to Jack. "Jack's right that we've got to fight. The Lord never told Nehemiah to leave the walls unbuilt. He never told David to leave the sling at home." He turned to Brooks. "And Daniel's right that there's a line. Because there's a difference between a people defending their homes and a government owning its people." He tapped the cane on the floor. "The difference is whether a man's got a choice."

"What do you mean?" Ethan asked.

"I mean ask, don't take." Samuel shrugged. "Ask people to bring in their ammunition. Ask them to register their rifles, so Jack knows what he's got. Ask them to stand a watch. Most of them will. You'd be amazed what folks will give when they're asked straight and they know why." He looked at Ortega. "And the ones who won't — let them be. Let them sit on their gasoline and their bullets. That's between them and God. Because the day you start kicking in a man's door to search his cellar, you've told him his house isn't his anymore. And then what are we fighting for?"

For a long moment, no one said anything.

Then Jack Reynolds let out a long breath and rubbed his face with both hands.

"The curfew stays," he said finally. "The passes stay. I need to know who's moving at night. Kane's got scouts in here. I'd bet my life on it."

Brooks nodded slowly. "Agreed."

"Militia service," Jack said. "Voluntary. But everybody gets asked. Personally. By me or Luis or Ethan."

"Agreed."

“The gun and ammunition registry. Voluntary. We ask. We explain why.” Jack looked at Brooks. “No searches.”

Daniel Brooks put his glasses back on.

“No searches,” he said. “Thank you, Jack.”

Jack looked at him for a long moment. Then, unexpectedly, the corner of his mouth twitched.

“You know, Mayor,” he said, “for a car dealer, you’re a pretty tough negotiator.”

“You’ve never bought a used truck from me,” Brooks said. “Or you’d know.”

* * *

Ashwood — The Middle Ring

January 14–20

The town went to work.

Ethan had seen Ashwood work before. He had seen it harvest two hundred acres of corn by hand in October, and turn a county fairgrounds into a refugee camp in a single day in November. But he had never seen anything like the week that followed.

They cut the railroad spur on the fourteenth. Hal Whitaker and a crew of forty men with acetylene torches and hacksaws and sledgehammers spent eleven hours pulling up a quarter mile of rusted rail from the old siding behind the grain elevator. By the sixteenth, the welders in the co-op machine shop — two retired pipefitters, a farm-equipment mechanic, and a nineteen-year-old girl named Ashley Trent who had taken a welding class at the vocational school the year before everything ended — had turned the rails into ninety steel hedgehogs, three rails welded together at their centers so that they stood like giant jacks, six feet tall, impossible to push aside with a truck.

They dragged the hedgehogs out to the roads with draft horses. They set them in staggered rows across Route 13 and Route 39 and County Road 12, backed by overturned grain trucks and school buses and the long concrete barriers that Jack’s volunteers had hauled from the county highway yard on flatbed wagons.

They felled trees. The township roads to the east and west ran through woodlots — oak and hickory and ash — and Jack’s crews dropped them across the roads in tangled heaps, fifty trees deep in places, their branches interlocked like the fingers of clasped hands.

They built bunkers. Behind every roadblock, crews of teenagers and grandmothers and schoolteachers and refugees from Ontario filled sandbags — tens of thousands of sandbags, made from feed sacks and pillowcases and flour bags and the burlap from the co-op — and stacked them into walls four and five feet thick, braced with railroad ties and roofed with corrugated steel from the old county barn.

And they built towers.

Jack wanted height. *Whoever sees first, wins,* he told his volunteers over and over, standing in the snow with his hands on his hips. *Kane's got binoculars and scouts and maybe even drones, for all we know. We've got eyes. So we're going to put eyes everywhere.*

So they built watchtowers. Twelve of them, spaced around the middle ring. They built them out of telephone poles salvaged from the dead power lines along Route 42, sunk six feet into the frozen ground with a borrowed post-hole auger and braced with steel cable. At the top of each one, forty feet above the fields, they nailed a platform of oak planks and a waist-high wall of sandbags and a roof of corrugated tin. Every tower got a ladder, a bell, a field radio if there was one to spare, and a pair of binoculars scrounged from some hunter's closet or boat cabin or birdwatcher's shelf.

On the nineteenth, Noah Simmons climbed to the top of the finished tower on Township Road 14 — the one nearest the old abandoned cornfield, and the fencepost that nobody in Ashwood yet knew about — and looked out across the snow.

He could see for miles. The white fields rolling away to the southwest. The dark smudge of the tree line. The thin black ribbon of the county road running off toward the horizon, toward Iron Ridge.

He stood there for a long time with the wind whipping at his coat. Then he took out the small pocket Bible Rebecca had given him and read aloud, to no one but the wind and the snow:

"*Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth, and give them warning from me.*"

Ezekiel three, verse seventeen.

He closed the Bible and put it back in his pocket, and settled in to watch.

* * *

The Firing Range — Whitaker Farm

January 17 — 10:00 a.m.

The problem was ammunition.

It had always been the problem. Jack had known it since the summer, when the Dawson brothers came and his volunteers had burned through half the town's supply in a single afternoon. He had known it every night since, lying awake doing the same grim arithmetic that Hal Whitaker did with bushels of corn.

Two hundred and sixty-two fighters. An average of fifty-eight rounds apiece, after the voluntary registry came in. Fewer than sixteen thousand rounds of rifle ammunition in the whole town, of a dozen different calibers, some of it older than the men who would fire it.

Kane had nine hundred men and the contents of a National Guard armory.

"So we don't miss," Luis Ortega said.

He stood in front of forty volunteers in Hal Whitaker's back pasture, where a row of hay bales had been set up against the frozen hillside with paper targets pinned to them. The volunteers stood in a ragged

line in the snow — farmers, mechanics, schoolteachers, refugees, two old men with deer rifles older than Ortega, and a sixteen-year-old girl named Hannah Voss who had a .22 and a look of fierce concentration on her freckled face.

“Every round we have is precious,” Ortega said. His voice was quiet, the way it always was, and they had to lean in to hear him. “We cannot afford to waste even one. Kane’s men will shoot a lot. They have a lot to shoot. They will fire at noise and at shadows and at nothing.” He looked down the line. “You will not. You will fire only when you have a target. Only when you are sure. And when you fire, you will hit.”

He picked up his own rifle — an old bolt-action Remington with a worn walnut stock that had belonged to his father-in-law — and settled into a prone position in the snow.

“Breathe in,” he said softly. “Breathe out. Halfway. Hold.” He squeezed the trigger. The rifle cracked. Two hundred yards away, a hole appeared in the center of the paper target. “Slow is smooth. Smooth is fast.”

He stood up and brushed the snow off his coat.

“Mr. Reynolds tells me that the best infantry in the world can be beaten by farmers who don’t miss,” he said. “I believe him.” He looked down the line. “So. Who is first?”

Hannah Voss stepped forward.

* * *

Jack watched from the top of the hill, beside Ethan, with his hands in his pockets.

“She’s good,” Ethan said, watching Hannah Voss put three rounds into a target the size of a dinner plate at a hundred yards.

“She’s sixteen,” Jack said.

“You said sixteen to sixty.”

“I know what I said.” Jack was quiet for a long time. “In Afghanistan, the Taliban used to send boys to fight. Fourteen, fifteen. We used to talk about it. How evil it was. How they didn’t care about their own kids.” He watched Hannah reload. “Now I’m teaching a sixteen-year-old girl to shoot men.”

“She asked to come,” Ethan said. “Gary said she’d have run away and done it anyway if he’d said no.”

“I know.” Jack shook his head. “That doesn’t make it better.”

They watched in silence. Down in the pasture, Ortega was kneeling beside Hannah in the snow, adjusting her grip, talking to her softly.

“Rebecca asked me something last week,” Jack said after a while. “About whether a Christian should even be doing this. Fighting. Killing.” He glanced at Ethan. “Bishop Brenneman came in with a wagon of honey on Tuesday. He saw the tank traps going up on Route 39. He didn’t say anything. He just looked at them for a long time, with this sad look on his face. Then he went and gave the honey to Donna Pierce and drove away.” He paused. “I asked Rebecca what she thought he was thinking.”

“What did she say?”

“She said the Mennonites read Matthew twenty-six. ‘*Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.*’” Jack shrugged. “And then she said her dad read Luke twenty-two. ‘*He that hath no sword, let him sell his garment, and buy one.*’ And Romans thirteen — the ruler ‘*beareth not the sword in vain.*’ And Nehemiah, with the sword in one hand and the trowel in the other.” He shook his head. “She said good Christians have been arguing about it for two thousand years. She said the bishop’s people chose to suffer rather than fight, and she honored them for it. And she said her dad believed that a man who stands between a murderer and a child is doing the work of love, even if he has to pull a trigger to do it.”

“What do you believe?”

Jack was silent for a long moment.

“I believe I’ve killed people who didn’t deserve it,” he said at last. “A little girl in Kandahar. And I believe I’m going to kill more people before this is over. Some of them will be men like Evan Lowe from Harlan’s Crossing — boys who took Kane’s oath because their mothers needed rations.” His voice was rough. “And I believe that if I don’t, Kane will walk into that high school gym and kill Sarah and Tess and every one of those nineteen kids from Mansfield.” He looked down at the pasture. “So I’m going to do it. And then I’m going to get down on my knees every night for the rest of my life and ask God to forgive me for the ones I get wrong.”

He turned to Ethan.

“Is that faith, Walker? Or is it just a soldier making excuses?”

Ethan thought about it for a long time.

“‘*Blessed are the peacemakers,*’” he said slowly. “But Jesus also said, ‘*Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*’” He shook his head. “I don’t know, Jack. I don’t think it’s excuses. I think it’s a man carrying something heavy that God never meant any of us to carry. And I think He sees you carrying it.”

Jack didn’t answer.

But down in the pasture, Hannah Voss put her fourth round through the center of the target, and Luis Ortega looked up the hill at Jack and nodded once, and Jack nodded back.

* * *

The Pass Office — Old County Recorder’s Office

January 18 — 2:15 p.m.

The movement passes were Rachel Monroe’s idea.

Not the passes themselves. Those were Jack’s. But the *way* they were made — that was Rachel’s.

“No names,” she said, standing in front of the council in the command center on the night of the fifteenth with a small square of wood in her hand. “No addresses. No photographs. No records kept anywhere.”

“Then how do we know who’s who?” Ortega asked.

“You don’t.” Rachel set the wooden square on the table. It was about the size of a playing card, cut from a scrap of pine molding, and burned into it with a soldering iron was a simple design: a small cross above a stylized sheaf of wheat. On the back was a number: *47*. “Every farm gets a set of these. Every household in town that needs to move at night — nurses, patrol riders, farmers bringing in milk — gets one. The number tells you which farm or household it belongs to. The *symbol* changes every week. Only the council and the checkpoint captains know what this week’s symbol is.” She tapped the square. “If a stranger shows up at a checkpoint at night with an old pass, or a forged one, you know. And if Kane’s people ever take the town, there’s no list to find. No names. Nothing to hand over.”

The room had been silent for a moment.

“You thought about this,” Mercer had said.

“I’ve spent six months carrying a box of paper that proves what happens to people whose names end up on lists,” Rachel had said. “Yes. I thought about it.”

So on the afternoon of the eighteenth, the old county recorder’s office on the ground floor of the courthouse — where for a hundred and fifty years the clerks of Ashwood County had recorded every birth and death and marriage and land sale in thick leather-bound books — became the pass office. And Rachel Monroe sat behind the long oak counter with a soldering iron and a box of pine scraps and a list that existed only in her own head, handing out small wooden squares with a cross and a sheaf of wheat burned into them.

Rebecca came in near the end of the day and stood watching her.

“You’re good at this,” she said.

“I’m good at protecting sources.” Rachel didn’t look up from the square she was burning. “It’s the same thing, really. Nine years of investigative journalism. You learn that the most dangerous thing in the world is a list in the wrong hands.” She blew on the hot wood. “My editor used to say I was paranoid.”

“And now?”

“Now I’m just right.” Rachel set the square down and finally looked up. Her gray eyes were tired. “I listened to Tape Twenty-Two last night. Your father’s sermon on the mark. Revelation thirteen.”

Rebecca waited.

“He said something I can’t stop thinking about.” Rachel looked down at the pass in front of her — the small cross burned into the pine. “He said the mark of the beast wouldn’t be forced on anybody at first. He said people would line up for it. Because by the time it came, they’d already have spent years getting used to giving their names to anyone who asked, in exchange for anything they wanted. He said, *The mark will not be the first time they sell themselves. It will only be the last.*”

The room was quiet except for the tick of the cooling soldering iron.

“I’ve been giving my name to anyone who asked for thirty-five years,” Rachel said softly. “Credit cards. Loyalty programs. Social media. Apps on my phone that tracked every step I took. I never thought twice about it. None of us did.” She shook her head. “Your father saw it. From a bell tower in Ashwood, Ohio. He saw exactly what they were doing to us, years before they did it.”

“He didn’t see it,” Rebecca said gently. “He read it. It was all there. It’s been there for two thousand years.”

Rachel looked at her for a long moment. Then she looked down at the little wooden square with the cross burned into it.

“Maybe I should read it, too,” she said. “The whole thing. Not just Mark.”

“I’d like that,” Rebecca said.

* * *

The Clinic — Ashwood High School

January 20 — 4:52 a.m.

The baby came in the middle of a snowstorm.

Maggie Voss had gone into labor at midnight, at her in-laws’ dairy farm on Route 39, and by two o’clock her blood pressure had risen so high that Sarah Collins, examining her by lantern light in the Voss kitchen, had gone very quiet and very calm in a way that frightened Kyle Voss more than any shouting could have.

“We need to move her,” Sarah said. “Now. To the clinic.”

It was two miles through a blizzard. Gary Voss hitched his Belgians to the milk wagon and Kyle wrapped his wife in every quilt in the house, and they drove through the storm with Sarah in the back holding Maggie’s hand and counting contractions, while the snow came sideways out of the dark and the horses plunged and snorted and the wagon lurched through drifts up to the axles. At the Route 39 roadblock, the volunteers had to drag aside two steel hedgehogs to let them through. At the inner ring checkpoint, Luis Ortega took one look at the wagon and waved them on without asking for a pass.

By four o’clock, Maggie Voss was on the stainless steel table on the stage of the Ashwood High School gymnasium, beneath the car headlamps, with Sarah Collins on one side and Tess Albright on the other and Dr. Warren Fitch standing by with a pediatric bag he had carried out of the burning basement of Mercy General.

Preeclampsia. Severe. The baby in distress.

Six months ago, Sarah could not have done it. Six months ago, she had had no anesthesia, no surgical kit, no one who had ever assisted at a Caesarean section.

Tonight she had a spinal needle and two vials of bupivacaine from the boxes Tess had carried out of Mansfield. She had a sterile surgical kit. She had a charge nurse with nineteen years in the emergency

department and a pediatrician with forty years of delivering babies. She had antibiotics, stolen from a gold-sealed crate and marked with a black grease-pencil cross.

She had everything she needed.

At 4:52 a.m., in the middle of a blizzard, in a high school gymnasium in a besieged town in a nation that no longer existed, Sarah Collins lifted a baby boy out of his mother's body and into the light.

For a terrible moment, he did not breathe.

Then Warren Fitch took him in his old, steady hands, and cleared his mouth, and rubbed his back, and turned him over — and the baby let out a thin, furious, outraged wail that echoed off the cinderblock walls of the gymnasium and rang up into the rafters, past the scoreboard still frozen at **HOME 0 — GUEST 0**.

Out in the bleachers, where half the Voss family had been waiting all night in the cold, Gary Voss put his face in his hands. Kyle, who had been standing at the edge of the bedsheet curtain for four hours without moving, sank down onto the bottom bleacher and wept.

When it was over — when Maggie was stitched and sleeping and the baby was washed and wrapped in a flannel blanket and lying on his mother's chest — Sarah came out from behind the curtain, peeling off her gloves, and sat down on the bleachers beside Kyle Voss.

"He's perfect," she said. "Seven pounds, two ounces. Maggie's going to be fine. Her pressure's already coming down."

Kyle couldn't speak. He just nodded, over and over, with tears running down his face.

"Have you picked a name?" Sarah asked.

Kyle wiped his eyes. Then he looked across the gymnasium, toward the far wall, where a few early risers had begun to gather — Rebecca Whitfield among them, her father's Bible under her arm, her face bright with tears.

"Caleb," Kyle said hoarsely. "Maggie picked it. After the pastor. After the tapes." He swallowed. "Caleb Gary Voss."

In the bleachers behind them, Gary Voss made a sound that was half laugh and half sob, and put his big, rough hand on his son's shoulder, and did not take it away.

Sarah sat there with them for a long time in the lantern light, listening to the baby cry behind the curtain.

"*Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is his reward. As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth.*"

Psalm 127. The same psalm Emily Walker had underlined in pink. The one about the watchman.

Sarah didn't know that. But Ethan did, when she told him about it later, and he went home that night and read it again, and thought that God had a strange and beautiful sense of timing.

* * *

The Courthouse Command Center

January 22 — 8:00 p.m.

The letter from Marcus Kane had been lying on the walnut table for three weeks.

It had arrived on January second, carried to the south gate by a rider under a white flag — a young man in Iron Alliance camouflage who had handed it to Luis Ortega without a word, turned his horse around, and ridden back down Route 13. Every member of the council had read it. Most of them had read it many times. Nobody had answered it.

Now Mayor Daniel Brooks unfolded it once more and read it aloud to the room.

…You have until February 1.

I am holding eleven citizens of Millbrook who chose disinformation over the safety of their neighbors. Among them is a man I believe you know. His welfare, and theirs, will depend on your answer.

I am not a cruel man, Walker. But I will do whatever is necessary to protect my people.

So will you. That is the only thing we have in common.

Brooks folded it and set it down.

“Ten days,” he said. “We owe him an answer.”

“We don’t owe him anything,” Jack said.

“No,” Brooks agreed. “But Carl Haskins does. And the other ten.” He looked around the table. “If we’re going to refuse — and I believe we are — then I want it to be clear. I want it written down. I want it to be the voice of this town, not just the silence of this room.”

He looked at Ethan.

“You write it,” he said.

Ethan stared at him. “Me?”

“He addressed it to you. And you’ve got more of a right to answer him than anybody.” Brooks slid a sheet of paper and a pen across the table. “I’ll sign it with you.”

Ethan looked down at the blank paper for a long time.

He thought about Carl Haskins, at the bottom of a frozen quarry somewhere, singing *Amazing Grace* in the dark. About Harlan’s Crossing, and Tom Mitchell, and the mayor who had been executed for refusing. About Boyd Strickland hanging from a bridge. About the eleven people taken from their beds in Millbrook. About Russ Keller’s grandchildren, and the tank traps on Route 39, and sixteen-year-old Hannah Voss lying in the snow with a rifle, breathing in, breathing out, holding.

About Caleb Gary Voss, two days old, sleeping on his mother’s chest in a high school gym.

He picked up the pen.

He wrote for a long time. He crossed things out. He started over twice. The room was silent around him — no one spoke, no one moved, and the only sounds were the hiss of the lanterns and the scratch of the pen.

When he was finished, he read it aloud.

To Marcus Kane:

We have received your letter. This is our answer.

Ashwood will not sign your charter. We will not register our people. We will not stop our churches from telling the truth.

We do not say this because we want war. We do not want war. We have buried enough of our own this winter, and we have no wish to bury yours. Many of the men who follow you are frightened boys whose families need bread. We hold nothing against them.

We say it because we have seen what your charter costs. We have seen Millbrook. We have seen Mansfield. We have seen what happens to men like Carl Haskins, whose only crime was to say no. And we believe, before God, that there are things worth more than safety.

Our gates remain open to anyone who comes in peace. If any man in your Alliance is hungry, we will feed him. If any man is sick, our doctor will treat him. If any man wants to hear the Word of God, our churches will welcome him. This has always been true, and it will remain true no matter what you do.

But if you come against us with guns, we will stand.

We ask you to release Carl Haskins and the ten citizens of Millbrook you are holding. They have done nothing but follow their conscience. Harm them, and you will answer for it — if not to us, then to the God whose judgment none of us can escape.

You wrote that the only thing we have in common is that we will both do whatever is necessary to protect our people. You are wrong. There is one more thing we have in common. We will both stand one day before Jesus Christ. I pray that when you do, you will have found Him before it was too late. Your wife did. So can you.

"*Choose you this day whom ye will serve… but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.*"

— Ethan Walker, Commander, Ashwood Community Guard

— Daniel Brooks, Mayor of Ashwood

When he finished, no one said anything for a long time.

"*Your wife did,*" Rachel said quietly. "How did you know about his wife?"

"Danny Haskins," Ethan said. "His uncle told him. Kane's wife vanished in April. She was a believer." He folded the letter. "Kane's son listens to the tapes. Danny heard it from somebody in Millbrook who has a cousin in Iron Ridge." He paused. "I don't know if it's true. But I think it is."

Brooks reached across the table, took the letter, and signed his name beneath Ethan's in a firm, clear hand.

Then he passed it down the table.

Jack signed it. Then Hal. Then Sarah. Then Rebecca, and Samuel Graves, in his slow, careful, old man's printing. Then Mercer, who looked at it for a long moment and said, "I'm not even from here," and signed it anyway. Then Rachel. Then Luis Ortega.

Then it came to Russ Keller.

He sat at the end of the table with the letter in front of him and the pen in his hand and did not move.

The room was very quiet.

Keller looked down at the paper. At the names. At the last line, in Ethan's hand: *As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.*

His jaw worked. His hand, holding the pen, trembled very slightly.

Then he set the pen down beside the letter, unused, and slid the paper back up the table.

"I can't," he said hoarsely. "I'm sorry. I can't."

Nobody said anything.

Keller stood up, pushed in his chair, and walked out of the room without looking at anyone.

Ethan watched the door close behind him. Across the table, he saw Daniel Mercer watching it too, with that same flat, careful, patient expression he had worn on the day Russ Keller had left the first meeting in November.

In my line of work, you learn to notice who leaves the room first.

* * *

The County Line — County Road 7

January 24 — 11:30 a.m.

Ethan delivered it himself.

Jack argued against it. So did Brooks. So did Sarah, who stood in the doorway of the clinic with her arms folded and told him in a low, furious voice that if he got himself killed on some grand gesture she would never forgive him. He listened to all of them. Then he saddled a horse.

He rode out Route 13 alone, past the steel hedgehogs and the sandbagged bunkers of the middle ring, past the farms of the outer ring with their watchtowers and their bells, and turned south onto County Road 7. He rode for four miles through the white, silent countryside, under a pale winter sun, with the letter in the inside pocket of his coat and Emily's New Testament in the other.

Ortega followed him at a distance of a quarter mile, with his rifle across his saddle. Ethan had told him not to. Ortega had ignored him.

At the top of the hill where County Road 7 crossed the old county line, Ethan reined in.

The green road sign was still there on its rusted post, pocked with birdshot. Kane's proclamation was still nailed across the words *ENTERING ASHWOOD COUNTY* — faded now, torn at the edges by three months of wind and weather, the ink running in long gray streaks down the paper.

A mile to the south, on the crest of the next hill, he could see the Grange Hall. The long white building with its green roof. The sandbagged positions on the hillside around it. The dark shapes of men moving on the porch. And behind the hall, under their tarps, two long, low shapes that he did not need binoculars to recognize.

They could see him, too. He knew that. He could feel their eyes on him, and their rifles.

He did not hurry.

He climbed down from the saddle and stood in front of the sign. He took the letter from his pocket and unfolded it. He took four nails and a hammer from his saddlebag.

And then, slowly and deliberately, one nail in each corner, he nailed Ashwood's answer over Marcus Kane's proclamation — right on top of it, covering it completely, so that the only words left showing on the sign were his own.

He stepped back and looked at it.

As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.

Then he took a stick from the roadside, and in the snow on the shoulder of County Road 7, exactly on the old county line, he drew a single long straight line across the road from one ditch to the other.

He stood on the Ashwood side of it for a long moment and looked south at the Grange Hall.

Then he climbed back on his horse and rode home.

Behind him, on the crest of the hill a mile away, a man with binoculars watched until he disappeared. Then he lowered them and keyed the radio on his shoulder.

"Grange Hall to Iron Ridge," said Staff Sergeant Wade Tolliver. "Tell the Colonel Walker came himself. He left an answer on the county line." He paused. "And, sir — he drew a line in the snow."

* * *

That night, Ethan stood on the courthouse roof in the cold and looked out at what Ashwood had become.

Twelve watchtowers ringed the town, their tin roofs pale in the starlight. Along every road, the dark shapes of barricades and hedgehogs and bunkers. At the farms, far out in the white fields, small yellow lanterns glowed in the haylofts and silos where the watchers sat. In the inner ring, the streets around the courthouse square were blocked with sandbags and overturned cars, and in the bell tower of First Baptist, and on the platform of the water tower, and in the top windows of the grain elevator, he could see the faint red glow of shielded flashlights where the snipers kept their watch.

It was not the town he had grown up in. It would never be that town again.

Somewhere down in the dark streets, a patrol was passing. He could hear their boots crunching on the frozen snow, and a low voice giving the password at the Maple Avenue checkpoint, and the click of a wooden pass being checked by lantern light.

And beneath all of it — beneath the barricades and the bunkers and the guns — he could hear something else. Faint, drifting up from the basement windows of First Baptist Church, where the Wednesday night Bible study was running late:

"*A mighty fortress is our God, A bulwark never failing; Our helper He, amid the flood Of mortal ills prevailing…*"

He stood on the roof and listened until it was over.

Jack Reynolds had built the walls. Luis Ortega had trained the riflemen. Hal Whitaker had welded the rails. Rachel had carved the passes, and Noah had climbed the towers, and nine thousand people had filled sandbags until their hands bled.

It was a good fortress. The best they could make.

But Ethan knew — the way he knew his own heartbeat, the way he knew what time it was at 3:17 in the morning — that it was not the one that would save them.

"*The name of the LORD is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe.*"

— Proverbs 18:10

* * *

END OF CHAPTER 10

CHAPTER 11

Voices of Hope

"*Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.*"

— 1 Timothy 4:12

* * *

The Hollow — Outside the South Barricade

January 25 — 7:30 a.m.

They called it the Hollow.

Nobody remembered who had named it. It was the old Buckeye Sand & Gravel pit on the east side of Route 13, a quarter mile south of Ashwood's middle ring — a broad, shallow bowl scooped out of the earth over fifty years of digging, sheltered from the wind by its own steep banks. The company had

gone bankrupt in 2015. Nothing had grown there since but scrub willow and cattails and rusted machinery.

Now fifteen hundred people lived in it.

They had come out of Mansfield in the first week of January and been fed at Ashwood's gate and asked to move on, and most of them had. North, to Millbrook and Kane's registration office. But some had not. Some had stopped at the gravel pit on their way, too tired or too sick or too frightened to walk any farther, and made camp in the shelter of the banks. And then more had stopped, because they saw the smoke of the first camp's fires. And then more.

They lived in tents and lean-tos and the rusted cabs of abandoned dump trucks. They lived in holes dug into the gravel banks and roofed with plywood and tarps. They burned scrub willow and old tires and anything else that would burn, and the black smoke hung over the bowl of the Hollow all day long, and at night their fires glowed in the dark like a scattering of coals.

They lived on the soup from Ashwood's gate. And on whatever they could steal from the farms. And on nothing at all.

Noah Simmons came out to the Hollow every morning at seven-thirty.

He came on a flatbed hay wagon pulled by one of Hal Whitaker's Belgians, with two boys from the youth group riding beside him and the wagon bed loaded with bread. It was not good bread. It was cornmeal and bean flour and a little honey, baked in the ovens of every church kitchen in Ashwood the night before by women who got up at three in the morning to do it. Each loaf was about the size of a man's fist. There were never enough.

He stopped the wagon at the lip of the gravel pit, where the old haul road came down into the bowl, and set the brake, and stood up.

And fifteen hundred people turned to look at him.

* * *

The first week, they had rushed the wagon. The second week, they had fought over the bread. The third week, a man had pulled a knife on Marcus Webb and taken an entire sack of loaves, and Noah had stood in the wagon bed and watched him run off across the gravel with it, and done nothing, because there was nothing to do.

Now, in the fourth week, they waited.

They stood in a ragged crowd at the foot of the haul road — gaunt, hollow-eyed, wrapped in blankets and garbage bags and whatever else they had. Children with their faces smeared black from the tire smoke. Old men leaning on sticks. Young mothers holding babies who did not cry anymore, because they did not have the strength. They stood and waited, and watched him, and did not push.

It was not because they had learned manners. Noah knew that. It was because of what he did before he handed out the bread.

He preached.

He had not planned to. The first day, he had simply started handing out loaves, and a woman had grabbed his arm and screamed at him, *Why? Why are you doing this? What do you want from us?* — and he had not known what to say, so he had told her the truth. *I don't want anything. Jesus fed people. I'm just trying to do what He did.* And she had laughed at him, a terrible, broken laugh, and said, *Jesus? Where was Jesus when my kids burned?* And a crowd had gathered around them. And Noah, standing in the bed of a hay wagon with his arms full of bread and his heart pounding in his throat, had opened his mouth and started to talk.

He had talked for twenty minutes. He did not remember most of what he said. He remembered that his voice shook the whole time, and that he quoted John three sixteen and got it slightly wrong, and that when he finished, nobody said anything at all. They just took the bread and walked away.

But the next morning, there were more of them waiting at the foot of the haul road. And the morning after that, more.

Now, three weeks later, they came every morning — not just for the bread, though they came for that too. They came to hear the skinny eighteen-year-old from Ashwood, with his thrift-store coat and his too-big knit cap and his worn pocket Bible, stand on a hay wagon in the smoke and tell them that God had not forgotten them.

* * *

"I want to tell you about a man named Joseph," Noah said.

His voice carried across the frozen gravel. He had learned how to make it carry — not by shouting, but by speaking slowly, from his chest, the way Samuel Graves had taught him, the way Pastor Whitfield did on the tapes.

"Joseph's brothers hated him. They threw him in a pit and sold him as a slave to strangers. He ended up in a foreign country with nothing. No family. No home. No money. Then somebody lied about him, and he got thrown in prison. He sat in that prison for years. Years." Noah looked out at the crowd. "I bet he felt like you do. Like everybody had forgotten him. Like God had forgotten him."

A few faces lifted.

"But God hadn't forgotten Joseph," Noah went on. "Not for one second. Every single thing that happened to him — the pit, the slavery, the prison — God was using it. And one day, Pharaoh had a dream nobody could understand, and somebody remembered Joseph. And they pulled him out of that prison, and he stood in front of the most powerful man in the world, and God gave him the answer. And Pharaoh made him the second most powerful man in Egypt, in charge of all the food in the whole country — right before the worst famine anybody had ever seen."

He paused.

"And when the famine came, you know who showed up in Egypt, starving, begging for bread?"

Nobody answered. But they were listening. All of them.

"His brothers," Noah said. "The same brothers who threw him in the pit. And Joseph could have killed them. He could have let them starve. Instead, he fed them. And he said something I want every one of

you to hear." He opened his pocket Bible, though he did not need to. "'*But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.*'"

He closed the Bible.

"I don't know what happened to you," he said quietly. "I don't know who hurt you, or who you lost, or what you saw in Mansfield. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I know what it's like to lose everybody. My mom and dad disappeared in April, and I was alone, and I hated God for it." He swallowed. "But I'm standing here to tell you what I found out. God didn't forget me. And He hasn't forgotten you. Whatever men meant for evil — Kane, Strickland, whoever — God can mean it for good. He can take a pit and a prison and a burning city, and turn it into a way to save people alive."

His voice broke slightly.

"He's not asking you to earn it. He's not asking you to fill out a form. He's just asking you to come. '*Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*' That's all. Just come."

The Hollow was silent. Only the crackle of the tire fires and the wind.

"That's it," Noah said. "That's all I've got today. Come get your bread."

And they came.

* * *

He was halfway through the loaves when the rock hit him.

It came out of the back of the crowd — a jagged chunk of gravel the size of an egg — and struck him just above the left eye. The world went white. He staggered back against the wagon's side rail, and the loaves in his arms tumbled onto the gravel, and he felt something warm running down his face and into his eye.

"*Liar!*"

A man was shoving his way to the front of the crowd. Tall, gaunt, bearded, wearing a torn Carhartt jacket over a hospital gown — Noah realized later that he must have taken it off a body in Mansfield. His eyes were wild.

"*Liar!*" he screamed again. "*God meant it for good? My wife burned alive in our house on Diamond Street! My little boy — my little boy —*" His voice cracked into a howl. "*You want to tell me God meant that for good? You stand up there with your bread and your Bible and your full belly, and you want to tell me God meant it for GOOD?*"

He bent and snatched up another rock.

The two boys from the youth group jumped down from the wagon, fists clenched. The Belgian shied and stamped. The crowd pulled back, murmuring, afraid.

"No," Noah said.

He pushed himself upright against the side rail. Blood was running into his left eye, and he couldn't see out of it, and his head was ringing like the church bell. But he held up his hand.

“Marcus. Jesse. Get back on the wagon.”

“Noah, he’s —”

“*Get back on the wagon.*”

The boys hesitated. Then they climbed back up.

Noah looked down at the man with the rock. The man’s hand was trembling. Tears were cutting clean tracks through the soot on his face.

“What was your son’s name?” Noah asked quietly.

The man stared at him.

“What?”

“Your boy. What was his name?”

For a long moment the man did not answer. The rock hung in his hand.

“Eli,” he whispered. “His name was Eli. He was six.”

Noah climbed down from the wagon.

He did it slowly, carefully, with blood running down his face. He walked across the frozen gravel until he was standing directly in front of the man, close enough to be hit again, close enough to smell the smoke and the sickness on him.

“I’m sorry about Eli,” he said. “I’m so sorry.”

The man’s face crumpled.

“I don’t know why God let it happen,” Noah said. “I’m not going to pretend I do. I’m eighteen. I don’t know much of anything.” He wiped the blood out of his eye with the back of his hand. “But I know He didn’t do it because He didn’t care. I know that. Because He had a Son, too. And He watched men kill Him. Nail Him to a piece of wood and leave Him hanging there till He died. And God didn’t stop it — not because He couldn’t, but because it was the only way to save us.” His voice shook. “God knows what it’s like to watch His boy die. He’s the only one who does. That’s why He’s the only one I know who can help you.”

The rock fell out of the man’s hand and clattered on the gravel.

And then the man from Diamond Street sank down onto his knees on the frozen ground of the Hollow, and put his face in his hands, and screamed — a long, raw, animal sound of grief that went on and on and echoed off the gravel banks.

Noah knelt down beside him in the gravel and put his arms around him.

He did not say anything else. He did not quote any more Scripture. He just knelt there in front of fifteen hundred people, with blood running down his face, and held a stranger while he wept for his son.

And one by one, all around them, the people of the Hollow began to kneel too.

* * *

Ashwood High School — Clinic

January 25 — 10:15 a.m.

“Six stitches,” Sarah Collins said, tying off the last suture above Noah’s eyebrow. “You’re going to have a scar.”

“Good,” Noah said.

She looked at him. He was sitting on the edge of a cot in the clinic with his coat off and his face washed, and a bruise the size of a plum was already spreading purple around his left eye. He looked about twelve years old.

“Good?” she repeated.

“Paul had scars.” Noah almost smiled, then winced. “Galatians six. ‘*From henceforth let no man trouble me: for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.*’” He shrugged. “Pastor Whitfield has a whole tape on it.”

Sarah shook her head slowly and began to clean up her instruments.

“Noah,” she said. “The man who threw the rock. What happened to him?”

“His name’s Dale Kirby. He was a mail carrier in Mansfield.” Noah looked down at his hands. “He’s in the wagon. Out front. Marcus is sitting with him. I’m taking him to Samuel’s farm this afternoon. Samuel said he’s got an empty bedroom.”

Sarah stopped.

“You’re bringing the man who hit you in the face with a rock *into Ashwood?*”

“He accepted Christ,” Noah said simply. “On his knees in the gravel. About forty people did, after he did. Isaiah’s out there now, praying with them.” He looked up. “He hasn’t got anywhere else to go, Dr. Collins. He hasn’t eaten in four days. His whole family’s dead. What was I supposed to do? Leave him there?”

Sarah looked at him for a long time.

Six months ago, this boy had been a sullen, angry seventeen-year-old who would not look anyone in the eye. Now he sat on the edge of a cot in her clinic with six stitches in his face and asked her, with complete sincerity, what else he was supposed to do.

“No,” she said finally. Her voice was not quite steady. “No, Noah. You weren’t supposed to leave him there.”

* * *

Ashwood — The Leaflets

January 26 — 2:40 p.m.

The helicopter came over Ashwood in the middle of the afternoon.

It came low and fast out of the southwest, the same sleek gray aircraft that had landed at Iron Ridge in December — no markings, no lights, its rotors thudding across the frozen fields. The bells in the watchtowers began ringing before it crossed the middle ring. By the time it reached the courthouse square, every rifle in Ashwood was pointed at the sky.

Jack Reynolds stood on the courthouse roof with his binoculars and his radio and shouted, "*Hold your fire! Hold your fire! Don't shoot unless it shoots first!*"

It did not shoot.

It came in low over the square, over the Wall of the Missing, over the steeple of First Baptist, and the side door slid open. And out of the door came a cloud of white.

Paper.

Thousands of sheets of paper, fluttering and spinning and swirling in the rotor wash, drifting down over the rooftops and the barricades and the streets like the first heavy snow of winter. The helicopter made one pass, then another, then a third — back and forth across the town until the sky was full of paper. Then it banked hard to the west and was gone, back toward Iron Ridge, the thud of its rotors fading across the fields.

For a long moment, Ashwood stood in silence and watched the paper fall.

Then, all over town, people began to pick it up.

* * *

Ethan read it standing in the middle of Main Street, with the paper still drifting down around him.

It was printed on good white paper, in clear black type, with a gold seal in the upper corner. He did not need to look at the seal to know what it would be.

TO THE CITIZENS OF ASHWOOD

A Message from the Regional Coordinating Authority

You are not our enemies.

The Iron Alliance has no quarrel with the ordinary people of Ashwood — the farmers, the workers, the mothers, the children. We know you are hungry. We know you are cold. We know many of you are sick. We know that your food will run out within weeks.

We want to help you.

Every other community in seven counties has joined the Alliance. Every one of them is receiving food, fuel, and medicine through the International Relief Coordination Office. Their children are eating. Their sick are being treated. Their families are safe.

Only Ashwood stands apart.

Why?

Because a small group of agitators has seized control of your town. They have refused every offer of help. They have rejected the relief that could save your lives. They distribute recordings that spread fear and superstition, telling you that the relief effort is evil, that the end of the world is coming, that you must suffer and die rather than accept the hand of friendship.

These people do not speak for you. They are leading you to destruction — the same destruction that fell on Mansfield.

You still have a choice.

On February 1, the Authority will enter Ashwood to restore order. Any citizen who does not resist will be protected. Any family that registers will receive immediate relief. The Authority seeks only to remove those who have endangered you: the self-appointed leaders who refused the Alliance, and the religious extremists who have spread fear and division among you.

Do not die for them.

Stay in your homes. Do not take up arms. Do not shelter the agitators. And when the Authority arrives, you will be safe.

— M. J. Kane, Regional Coordinator

Ethan read it twice. Then he folded it very carefully and put it in his pocket.

All around him, up and down Main Street, people were standing in the snow reading the same sheet of paper. He watched their faces. He saw fear. He saw anger. He saw confusion.

And in some of the faces — not many, but some — he saw something else.

He saw people looking up from the paper at the steeple of First Baptist Church. And then looking at each other.

And then looking away.

* * *

First Baptist Church

January 27 — 1:15 a.m.

The fire started in the basement.

Noah smelled it first. He had been sleeping on a cot in the tape room, the way he often did now, because the boom boxes ran all night and someone had to change the tapes. He woke in the dark to a sharp, chemical stink — gasoline — and then to a sound like a great breath being drawn in, and then to light. Orange light, flickering under the door that led to the fellowship hall.

He was on his feet before he was fully awake.

He threw open the door, and the heat hit him like a fist.

The fellowship hall was burning. Not all of it — not yet — but the far end, where the long tables stood against the wall, was a sheet of fire from floor to ceiling. The tables themselves were burning. The

folding chairs were burning. The old hymnals on the shelves along the wall were burning, their pages curling and blackening and lifting up into the smoke like dying moths. And the fire was spreading along the floor toward him, following a dark, wet trail that led straight to the door of the tape room.

Someone had poured gasoline across the floor of the fellowship hall and set it alight.

"*FIRE!*" Noah screamed. "*FIRE! FIRE!*"

Behind him, in the tape room, two younger boys from the youth group — Marcus Webb and a thirteen-year-old named Jesse Lindquist — had been asleep on the floor beside the boom boxes. They sat up, coughing, eyes wide.

"Get out!" Noah grabbed them both by their collars and shoved them toward the back door, the one that led up the outside stairwell to the church parking lot. "Get out and ring the bell! *Go!*"

They went.

Noah turned back to the tape room.

Six boom boxes on the long folding table. Four hundred copied tapes in cardboard boxes along the wall, labeled and ready to go out to the farms and the Hollow in the morning. The notebooks — copies of the notebooks, hand-transcribed by the youth group over the last month, stacks of them. And the smoke already pouring in through the open door, thick and black and choking.

He grabbed a box of tapes. Then another. He ran them up the outside stairs and threw them into the snow in the parking lot and ran back down. He grabbed a third box. The smoke was so thick now that he could not see the far wall. His eyes were streaming. His lungs were burning. He grabbed a fourth box and ran.

Above him, the bell in the tower of First Baptist began to ring — wild and frantic and out of rhythm, the way a thirteen-year-old boy rings a bell when he is terrified.

And all over Ashwood, the other bells answered.

* * *

They saved the church.

It took two hours and four hundred people and every bucket in town. The volunteer fire department — six old men and an antique pumper truck that still ran, barely, on a tank of diesel Jack had been hoarding for exactly this — pumped water from the hydrant on Church Street until the pressure failed. Then the bucket lines took over, stretching from the church to the creek three blocks away, passing buckets hand to hand in the freezing dark while the fire roared in the basement windows and the smoke poured out into the sky.

The sanctuary survived. The bell tower survived. The pastor's study survived.

The fellowship hall did not. Neither did the tape room.

When it was over, Noah Simmons sat in the snow in the church parking lot, wrapped in a blanket, with his face black with soot and his hands blistered and his lungs so raw he could barely breathe. Around him lay the boxes he had carried out of the fire. Six of them. Maybe three hundred tapes.

Everything else was gone. The boom boxes. The notebooks. A hundred more tapes that he had not been able to reach.

Rebecca found him there. She knelt beside him in the snow and put her arms around him, and for a long time neither of them said anything.

“The originals,” Noah said finally, hoarsely. “Your dad’s tapes. The footlocker —”

“Safe,” Rebecca said. “I took them home after Tape Twenty-Eight went missing. They’ve been under my bed for a month.” She held him tighter. “They’re safe, Noah. All thirty-nine of them. And the notebooks.”

Noah closed his eyes. His whole body sagged.

“Who did this?” he whispered.

Rebecca didn’t answer.

On the brick wall beside the church’s back door, lit by the dying glow of the fire, someone had spray-painted four words in red:

PREACHERS WILL GET US KILLED

* * *

The Courthouse — Holding Room

January 28 — 3:00 p.m.

They caught him the next day.

It was not difficult. His name was Travis Boone. He was nineteen years old. He had bought three gallons of gasoline from a man on Poplar Street for a box of shotgun shells, and the man had remembered it, and told Luis Ortega. When Ortega’s volunteers found Travis, he was sitting on the back steps of his mother’s house on Locust Street with his head in his hands, and his coat still smelled of smoke, and he did not try to run.

Now he sat in the old holding room in the basement of the courthouse — a windowless concrete room that had once held drunks and shoplifters overnight, back when Ashwood still had a police department — on a steel bench, with his elbows on his knees and his face turned to the wall.

Noah stood in the doorway and looked at him.

“You don’t have to do this,” Jack said quietly, behind him.

“I know,” Noah said.

He went in. Jack closed the door behind him but did not lock it.

Travis Boone did not look up. He was thin and pale, with a scraggly attempt at a beard and a Cleveland Indians cap pulled low over his eyes. Noah knew him vaguely. He had been two years ahead of Noah at Ashwood High. A wrestler. His mother cleaned houses. His father had left when he was a kid.

Noah sat down on the other end of the steel bench.

For a long time, neither of them said anything.

“My brother’s with Kane,” Travis said finally, to the wall. His voice was flat and dead. “Cody. He’s twenty-two. He went to Iron Ridge in August because Kane was paying in food and he wanted to send it home to Mom. He’s a sergeant now.” He swallowed. “He’s going to be one of the guys who comes through the gate on February first.”

Noah said nothing.

“The paper,” Travis went on. “From the helicopter. It said they only want the agitators. The leaders and the preachers. It said everybody else would be safe.” His voice cracked. “I thought — if there weren’t any preachers. If there weren’t any tapes. Then maybe they wouldn’t have a reason. Maybe Cody wouldn’t have to shoot anybody. Maybe nobody would have to shoot *him*.” He finally turned and looked at Noah. His eyes were red. “I didn’t know anybody was in there. I swear to God I didn’t know. I thought the church was empty. When I heard the bell and I saw the kids running out —” He stopped. His whole body was shaking. “I could have killed you. I could have killed those little kids.”

“But you didn’t,” Noah said.

“I *could* have.”

“But you didn’t.” Noah looked at him steadily. “Nobody died, Travis. Everybody got out.”

Travis stared at him. “Why are you even in here? Why are you talking to me? I burned down your church.”

“You burned down the basement,” Noah said. “The church is fine. And the tapes are fine. Rebecca had the originals at her house.” He almost smiled. “So you didn’t even get the tapes.”

Travis let out a sound that was halfway between a laugh and a sob.

“Then what’s the point?” he whispered. “What was any of it for?”

Noah was quiet for a moment. Then he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a single cassette tape. It was one of the ones he had carried out of the fire. The case was scorched black on one corner, and the label was water-stained, but the handwriting was still clear: *TAPE 14 — THE PRODIGAL SON.*

He set it on the bench between them.

“There’s a story in here,” he said. “About a boy who did something terrible. Took everything his father gave him and threw it away. Ended up in a pigpen, starving, eating the pig food. And he thought his father would never want him back. So he practiced a speech — *I’m not worthy to be your son, just make me a servant.*” Noah paused. “But when he came home, his father saw him coming from a long

way off. And his father ran to him. Ran. An old man. And threw his arms around him and kissed him before the boy could even finish his speech."

Travis stared at the tape.

"That's what God's like," Noah said. "That's what He's really like. Not the way Kane's paper says. Not the way anybody says. He's the father running down the road." He stood up. "I forgive you, Travis. For the fire. I mean it. And so does Rebecca. And so does God, if you ask Him."

He walked to the door. Then he turned back.

"And for what it's worth," he said, "I'll pray for Cody. Every day. Till this is over."

He went out.

Behind him, in the concrete room, Travis Boone sat on the steel bench and stared at the scorched cassette tape for a long time. Then, slowly, he reached out and picked it up and held it in both hands, the way a man holds something he is afraid to drop.

* * *

Iron Ridge — The Old Union Hall

January 28 — 9:40 p.m.

Tyler Kane had been careful.

He had been careful for five weeks. Careful when he retrieved the coffee can from the road sign on Township Road 14, on a scouting ride with Sergeant Hendricks, while Hendricks was relieving himself in the trees. Careful when he hid the tapes under his mattress. Careful when he listened to them at night with the volume turned down so low he had to press the speaker against his ear. Careful when he started telling other kids.

It had started with a twelve-year-old girl named Kaylee Dorsey, who had cried in the lunch line at the union hall school because she missed her mother, who had died of the flu in November. Tyler had sat with her after school and told her about his own mother, and about Jesus, and about the tapes. And Kaylee had told her friend Mia. And Mia had told her brother Owen. And Owen had told two boys from his barracks family.

Now there were nine of them.

They met on Tuesday and Friday nights in the old boiler room beneath the union hall, where the school had been set up — a concrete cellar full of rusted pipes and dead valves, with a single door and a single candle. Tyler brought the cassette player. Kaylee brought a flashlight. They sat in a circle on the cold floor, nine kids between twelve and sixteen, children of Kane's soldiers and Kane's workers and Kane's conscripts, and they listened to a dead preacher from Ashwood tell them about a God who loved them.

Tonight it was Tape Seven. *The Church in the Catacombs.*

"*There's a place under the city of Rome,*" the voice said, hissing softly out of the speaker in the flickering candlelight, "*where the early Christians used to meet. Tunnels, dug in the soft rock. Miles of them. They buried their dead there. And when the emperors started hunting them down, they met there in secret to worship. They'd scratch symbols on the walls so they'd know each other — a fish, an anchor, a shepherd carrying a lamb. They'd sing so quietly the guards above couldn't hear.*"

"*And you know what? The Roman Empire is gone. It fell fifteen hundred years ago. But the Church those people started in the tunnels — it's still here. It outlasted every emperor who ever tried to kill it. Because Jesus said, 'Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.'*"

"*If you're listening to this in secret — if you're meeting in a basement, or a barn, or a cellar somewhere because it's not safe to meet in the open — then you are part of the oldest and bravest tradition in the Christian faith. You're in the catacombs. And the gates of hell will not prevail against you either.*"

Kaylee Dorsey was crying silently in the candlelight. Owen had his head bowed. Tyler sat with his back against a cold iron pipe and his mother's Bible open on his knees, and felt something in his chest that he did not have a word for.

He did not hear the footsteps on the stairs until it was almost too late.

"*Somebody's coming!*" Mia hissed.

Tyler's hand shot out and hit the stop button. Kaylee snapped off the flashlight. Owen pinched out the candle with his fingers.

Absolute darkness. Nine children holding their breath.

The footsteps came down the concrete stairs outside the boiler room door. Heavy. Slow. A man's boots. They stopped just outside.

A flashlight beam swept across the crack under the door.

Tyler recognized the boots. He had heard them on the stairs of his own house a thousand times.

Dutch Kessler.

For a long, long moment, nothing happened. Tyler could hear his own heart pounding. He could hear Kaylee's ragged breathing beside him. He pressed his mother's Bible against his chest and prayed — not in words, just in a wordless, desperate cry from somewhere deep inside him. *Please. Please. Please.*

The door handle turned.

And then, from somewhere up the stairs, a voice called out.

"*Sergeant Kessler! Colonel wants you at the house! It's urgent — the helicopter's coming back!*"

The door handle stopped.

A long pause. Then Kessler grunted, and the boots turned, and went back up the stairs, heavy and slow, and faded away.

Nobody in the boiler room moved for five full minutes.

Then Owen whispered, very softly, in the darkness: "*The gates of hell shall not prevail.*"

And nine children in the dark began, very quietly, to laugh and cry at the same time.

* * *

The Courthouse Square — Ashwood

January 29 — 4:00 p.m.

Noah had not planned to preach on the courthouse steps.

He had come to the square to pick up a load of firewood for the Hollow. But when he rode up in the wagon, the square was full of people — hundreds of them, standing in knots and clusters in the snow, arguing. He could hear it from a block away. *The paper said. — Kane's only after the preachers. — If we hand over the leaders — Are you crazy? Look what he did to Mansfield! — My kids are hungry! — Walker's going to get us all killed! — It's the tapes. It's the church. If they'd just shut up —*

He saw Russ Keller in the middle of one of the knots, talking fast, his heavy face red. He saw Gary Voss in another, shouting back at someone. He saw a woman he did not know holding up one of Kane's white leaflets and waving it like a flag.

And he saw the Wall of the Missing, behind all of them, along the south side of the courthouse. Thousands of faces, fluttering in the cold wind.

He did not decide to climb the steps. He simply found himself doing it. He left the wagon at the curb and walked up through the crowd — people turning to look at him, at the stitches above his eye, at the purple bruise — and climbed the wide limestone steps of the courthouse to the top, where he stood in front of the tall doors, beneath the tattered flag on its pole, and turned around.

He did not wait for them to go quiet. He simply started talking. And they went quiet anyway.

"My name is Noah Simmons," he said. "Most of you know me. I'm the kid who hauls firewood. I'm the kid who copies the tapes. I'm the kid whose parents disappeared in April." He swallowed. "And I'm one of the people Marcus Kane's paper says you should hand over."

Silence spread across the square like ripples on a pond.

"I'm not going to tell you not to be scared," Noah said. "You should be scared. I'm scared. Kane's got nine hundred men and two cannons, and he's coming in three days. I'm not stupid." He looked out at them. "But I want you to look at something before you decide anything."

He turned and pointed at the Wall of the Missing.

"Look at them," he said. "Go ahead. Look."

Slowly, hundreds of heads turned.

“Those are the people who were taken,” Noah said. “Your kids. Your husbands. Your wives. Your moms and dads. They were taken because they belonged to Jesus. Because they were ready. And we were left, because we weren’t.” He paused. “I used to think that meant God didn’t care about us. That He took the good ones and left the rest of us to rot. But I was wrong. He left us because He *wasn’t finished with us.* Because He still wanted us to come home. ‘*The Lord is not slack concerning his promise… but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.*’”

He turned back to the crowd.

“Every single face on that wall would tell you the same thing, if they could,” he said. “They’d tell you: *Don’t trade your soul for bread.* They’d tell you: *Don’t hand over the people who told you the truth.* They’d tell you: *We’re waiting for you. Come home.*”

His voice cracked.

“My mom used to leave notes in my lunch box. Every day. Even when I was sixteen and I told her it was embarrassing. Every day, a verse. I threw most of them away without reading them.” He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small, folded, water-stained piece of paper. “I found this one in my old backpack in June. It was the last one she ever wrote. From the day before.” He unfolded it with shaking hands and read it aloud.

“‘*For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.’ Second Timothy 1:7. Love you, buddy. — Mom.*”

He folded it and put it back in his pocket.

“Kane wants you to be afraid,” he said. “That’s all his paper is. It’s fear, printed on nice paper with a gold seal. He wants you to be so afraid that you’ll turn on each other. That you’ll burn down your own church, or hand over your own neighbors, or sign away your own souls, just to make the fear stop.” He shook his head. “But God didn’t give us fear. He gave us power. And love. And a sound mind.”

He looked out over the square.

“So use it,” he said. “Use your sound mind. Look at Mansfield. Look at Millbrook. Look at what happens to people who trust Kane. And then look at that wall, and ask yourself who you want to be standing with when Jesus comes back.” He paused. “Because He *is* coming back. Every single thing the Bible said has come true so far. That part’s going to come true too.”

His voice dropped.

“And if you’ve never given your life to Him — if you’re standing here today and you know you’re not ready — then don’t wait. Don’t wait till Kane gets here. Don’t wait till it’s too late. You don’t need a church. You don’t need a preacher. You don’t need me. You just need to tell Him the truth. Right here. Right now. In the snow.”

He stopped. He did not know what else to say.

So he knelt down on the top step of the courthouse, in front of the tall doors, beneath the tattered flag, and bowed his head.

For a long time, nothing happened. The wind moved across the square. The photographs on the Wall of the Missing fluttered and rustled.

Then, at the foot of the steps, a woman sank down onto her knees in the snow.

Noah did not see her face. He did not need to. But Ethan Walker, standing at the edge of the square where he had come running at the first sound of the crowd, saw her clearly. She was a young woman in a worn parka, with a baby on her hip and two small children clinging to her legs.

Jenna Keller Morrison. Russ Keller's daughter. With his three grandchildren.

Ten feet away, in the middle of the crowd, Russ Keller stood absolutely still, staring at his daughter kneeling in the snow. His face had gone the color of ash.

And then more people were kneeling. A dozen. Fifty. A hundred. Farmers and refugees and shopkeepers and teenagers. Travis Boone's mother, who had come to the square to beg someone to let her see her son. Dale Kirby, the mail carrier from Diamond Street, with a bandage on his hand where Noah had pulled the rock from it. Men who had been shouting at each other two minutes before, kneeling side by side in the snow.

Not all of them. Not even most. Hundreds stood watching, arms folded, faces closed.

But enough.

Russ Keller did not kneel. He stood in the middle of the square with his hands at his sides and watched his daughter weep in the snow with his grandchildren around her, and something moved across his heavy face that Ethan could not read — something that looked like grief, and like terror, and like a man standing at the edge of a cliff.

Then he turned and pushed his way out of the crowd and walked away down Main Street, fast, with his head down.

Ethan watched him go.

* * *

The Courthouse Square — Ashwood

January 31 — 11:30 p.m.

On the last night, they kept vigil.

Nobody organized it. Rebecca would say afterward that she had only meant to go to the square and pray for an hour, alone, in front of the Wall of the Missing. But when she got there, at nine o'clock, there were already fifty people standing in the snow with candles in mason jars. By ten, there were five hundred. By eleven, the square was full.

They stood in the cold and the dark with their candles, thousands of small flames flickering in the wind, filling the square and spilling out down Main Street and Church Street and Maple Avenue. They did not speak much. Sometimes someone would begin a hymn, and it would spread through the crowd and

swell and fade. Sometimes someone would pray out loud — Samuel Graves, or Isaiah Freeman, or a farmer or a refugee or a child. Mostly they simply stood, and held their candles, and waited.

Ethan stood near the courthouse steps with Sarah on one side and Jack on the other. He could see Rebecca near the Wall, with Samuel and Noah. He could see Mayor Brooks and Ellen, holding hands. He could see Hal Whitaker and Gary Voss and Kyle, with baby Caleb bundled against Maggie's chest. He could see Tess Albright with Mateo on her hip and the eighteen other children from Mansfield clustered around her like ducklings. He could see Rachel Monroe, standing a little apart at the edge of the crowd, holding a candle she had not lit.

He could see Travis Boone, released that afternoon into the custody of his mother, standing beside her with a scorched cassette tape in his coat pocket.

He could not see Russ Keller.

At 11:55, Noah Simmons climbed the ladder into the bell tower of First Baptist Church with a lantern, and looked out toward the southwest.

For a long moment, he saw nothing but darkness. The white fields. The black tree line. The faint ribbon of County Road 7.

Then, six miles away, on the crest of the hill where the Grange Hall stood, lights came on.

Not one or two. Dozens. Headlights. Floodlights. Flashlights. Moving. He could see them shifting and swinging and gathering on the hilltop, and he could see, in the glow of them, the long dark shapes behind the Grange Hall — and he could see that the tarps were gone.

He keyed his radio with a hand that was not quite steady.

"Tower to Walker," he said. "The lights are on at the Grange Hall. They've uncovered the guns."

Down in the square, Ethan heard it on the radio at his belt. He did not say anything. He simply looked up at the steeple of First Baptist, where he could see Noah's lantern burning in the bell tower, small and steady against the stars.

Then the courthouse clock — which had not worked since April — did not strike midnight.

But everyone in the square knew when it came anyway.

February first.

And in the silence, a voice rose from somewhere near the Wall of the Missing. Ethan did not know whose it was. A woman's voice, thin and wavering and utterly sure.

"*Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side; Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain…*"

And five thousand voices, holding five thousand candles in the snow, sang it with her.

"*Leave to thy God to order and provide; In every change He faithful will remain. Be still, my soul: thy best, thy heavenly Friend Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.*"

In the bell tower, Noah Simmons stood with his lantern and watched the lights on the hill six miles away, and sang with them, and was not afraid.

"*And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.*"

— Revelation 12:11

* * *

END OF CHAPTER 11

CHAPTER 12

The World Watches

"*And through his policy also he shall cause craft to prosper in his hand; and he shall magnify himself in his heart, and by peace shall destroy many.*"

— Daniel 8:25

* * *

Lagos, Nigeria

February 1 — 6:00 p.m. local time

In a concrete apartment block on the edge of the Makoko waterfront, forty people crowded into a single room around a solar-powered radio, and a grandmother named Adaeze Okonkwo pressed her hands together beneath her chin and wept.

"*…and so, as of this hour, I am proud to announce that every nation represented in the Council has agreed to a complete and immediate cessation of hostilities, on every continent, for a period of seven days. For one week, the guns of the world will fall silent. For one week, no child anywhere on earth will die in war…*"

Mumbai, India

February 1 — 10:30 p.m. local time

On Marine Drive, where the sea wall curved along the black water of the Arabian Sea, ten thousand people stood shoulder to shoulder in the warm night and listened to loudspeakers mounted on the lampposts. When the voice said *seven days,* a roar went up that could be heard across the bay.

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

February 1 — 2:00 p.m. local time

In a favela on the hills above Copacabana, a teenage boy climbed onto a tin roof with a battery radio held above his head and turned the volume all the way up, and the whole hillside went silent to listen.

Jerusalem

February 1 — 7:00 p.m. local time

At the Western Wall, in the cold winter dusk, an old rabbi with a white beard stood apart from the crowd of worshippers gathered around a portable television, and listened to the voice with his eyes closed and his lips moving silently. When the voice said, *Next month, I will travel to this holy city, to begin talks that will bring a lasting peace to the land where three faiths were born,* the old rabbi opened his eyes, and looked up at the ancient stones of the wall, and his face was very pale.

Ashwood, Ohio

February 1 — 12:00 p.m.

And in a small town in north-central Ohio, where no shells had fallen that morning, and no army had come through the gate, nine thousand people who had spent the night holding candles in the snow stood in the streets and in their kitchens and in the barns and bunkers of the middle ring, and listened to the same voice, and did not know whether to laugh or to weep.

* * *

The Courthouse Command Center

February 1 — 12:20 p.m.

“Seven days,” Jack Reynolds said. “A *ceasefire.*”

He said it the way a man might say *a unicorn.* He was standing at the window of the commissioners’ chamber with his binoculars hanging around his neck, looking southwest toward the Grange Hall, where the guns had been uncovered at midnight. He had been standing there since dawn, waiting for the first shell.

It had not come.

At nine o’clock, Noah had radioed from the bell tower that the crews around the guns at the Grange Hall had stopped moving. At ten, that they were putting the tarps back on. At eleven, that trucks were pulling away from the hilltop, heading back south toward Iron Ridge.

At noon, the voice had come on the radio.

“Every nation in the Council,” Daniel Mercer said. He was sitting at the long walnut table with the shortwave radio in front of him, turning the dial slowly through the static, listening for anything else. “Every continent. Every conflict. For seven days.” He shook his head slowly. “I’ve been in the intelligence business for twenty-one years. I have never — never — heard of anything like it. You couldn’t get the Hutus and the Tutsis to agree on the time of day. You couldn’t get a ceasefire in Syria to last an afternoon.” He looked up. “And this man just announced one for the entire planet. And from what I’m hearing on the other bands, it’s *holding.*”

“He called it the Week of Peace,” Rebecca said quietly.

She was sitting at the end of the table with her father's Bible open in front of her. Beside her, Samuel Graves sat with both hands folded on top of his cane.

"Kane's standing down," Ethan said. He was sitting across from Mercer, his elbows on the table, his face gray with exhaustion. He had not slept either. None of them had. "Because of *him.* Because the man on the radio told him to."

"Because Sorensen told him to," Mercer corrected. "Kane's charter comes from the Office. His relief supplies come from the Office. His helicopter, his coffee, his recognition — all of it comes from the Office. If the Office says *stand down for a week,* Kane stands down for a week." He almost smiled. "The most powerful warlord in Ohio, and he can't fire his own guns without permission from Brussels."

"So we've got seven more days," Brooks said.

"We've got seven more days," Jack agreed. He turned from the window. "And so does Kane. He's not going to spend them sitting on his hands."

Nobody answered that.

Mayor Brooks took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. When he put them back on, he looked around the table with an expression Ethan had never seen on his face before. Not fear, exactly. Something stranger. Something almost like wonder.

"I have to say it," Brooks said slowly. "Somebody has to. The man just stopped every war on earth." He spread his hands. "Kane was going to shell this town this morning. My wife was going to be sitting in the basement of the Methodist church with three hundred other people, waiting for the ceiling to come down. And she's not. Because of him." His voice cracked slightly. "I know what the tapes say. I know what Rachel's papers say. I believe them. I do." He looked down at the table. "But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't grateful."

The room was silent.

It was Samuel Graves who finally answered. The old farmer looked at Brooks for a long moment with his faded blue eyes, and when he spoke, his voice was very gentle.

"Of course you're grateful, Daniel. So am I. Nobody in his right mind wants the shells to fall." He tapped his cane softly on the floor. "That's what makes him so dangerous."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the devil doesn't tempt you with things you don't want." Samuel shrugged. "He didn't tempt Jesus with poison. He tempted Him with bread. With safety. With all the kingdoms of the world, handed over nice and easy without any cross." He nodded at the radio. "If that man came promising war and famine, there wouldn't be a soul on this earth who'd follow him. He comes promising peace. And peace is the one thing every single one of us wants more than anything."

"'*For when they shall say, Peace and safety,*'" Rebecca read softly from her father's Bible, "'*then sudden destruction cometh upon them.*'"

Brooks looked at her. Then down at his hands.

“I know,” he said. “I know, Rebecca. That’s the worst part. I know, and I’m *still* grateful.”

* * *

The Marsh Farm — Township Road 9

February 2 — 3:40 p.m.

The satellite dish had been bolted to the roof of Ed Marsh’s machine shed for eleven years.

It was an old DirecTV dish, eighteen inches across, gray and weathered, with a crack in the plastic housing where a hailstone had struck it in 2019. Ed had used it to watch Ohio State football and the Weather Channel. When the grid went down in April, he had stopped thinking about it.

Ashley Trent had not.

“The satellites are still up,” she said, standing on the roof of the machine shed in the freezing wind, with a wrench in one hand and a coil of coaxial cable over her shoulder. She was nineteen, with short dark hair and grease under her fingernails and a welding burn on the back of her left hand from the tank traps. “The ground stations are what went down. Most of them, anyway. But the Office has been broadcasting on satellite for weeks. You can hear the audio feed on shortwave, but somebody told Mr. Mercer they’re putting video on the old commercial satellites too. So if we’ve got a dish, and a receiver, and a TV, and enough power —”

“We can watch him,” Ed Marsh said from the ladder below.

“We can watch him.” Ashley tightened the last bolt and wiped her nose on her sleeve. “Mr. Mercer wants to see his face. He says you can learn more from watching a man for five minutes than from listening to him for a year.”

She climbed down the ladder, and together they carried the dish to the back of Ed’s pickup truck, where a small gasoline generator, a satellite receiver salvaged from a Walmart stockroom in Mansfield, and a forty-inch flat-screen television from the Marshes’ living room were already wrapped in blankets.

“You really think it’ll work?” Ed asked.

Ashley shrugged. “Only one way to find out.”

* * *

Ashwood High School Gymnasium

February 3 — 7:45 p.m.

It worked.

By seven-thirty on the evening of February third, the gymnasium of Ashwood High School had been cleared of cots for the first time since October. The sick had been moved into the wrestling room and the old home economics classroom. The bleachers had been pulled out on both sides. And at center court, on a folding table beneath the frozen scoreboard, sat Ed Marsh’s forty-inch television, wired to a

satellite receiver and a car battery and a gasoline generator running outside the back door, its cable snaking out through a propped-open window to an eighteen-inch dish bolted to the roof of the school.

The screen glowed blue.

The gym was packed. Every seat in the bleachers was taken. People stood along the walls and in the doorways and sat cross-legged on the basketball court in front of the table, wrapped in coats and blankets, packed so tightly that their breath rose in a single cloud toward the rafters. Children sat on their parents' shoulders. Old people sat in folding chairs along the baseline. Refugees from the Hollow, brought in by Noah's wagon, stood at the back, gaunt and silent.

None of them had seen a television screen light up in nine months.

At 7:52, the blue screen flickered. The crowd went utterly still.

Then, all at once, there was a picture.

It was a vast hall, all white marble and gold, with a high domed ceiling and tall windows looking out on a night sky. It was filled with people — thousands of them, seated in long curving rows, in suits and uniforms and robes and saris and turbans and kaffiyehs. At the front of the hall rose a wide white stage, and behind the stage, on an enormous banner of deep blue silk, hung a seal worked in gold thread: a stylized globe encircled by twelve interlocking rings.

A murmur rose from the bleachers. Ethan, standing against the wall near the stage with Sarah and Jack, felt Rachel Monroe go rigid beside him.

"Geneva," Mercer said quietly, from her other side. "The Palais des Nations. The old League of Nations building. I was there once, in 2014." He was staring at the screen. "I've never seen it look like that."

A caption appeared at the bottom of the screen, in English and French and a dozen other languages scrolling beneath it:

THE NIGHT OF NATIONS — A GLOBAL CELEBRATION OF PEACE

LIVE FROM GENEVA

The camera swept slowly across the hall. Heads of state in the front rows — Ethan recognized some of them, faintly, from a lifetime of evening news. Kings. Presidents. Prime ministers. A man in the white robes of the Pope sat near the front, beside an old man in the black robes and tall hat of an Orthodox patriarch, beside a bearded imam, beside a Buddhist monk in saffron. The camera lingered on them, and the crowd in the Ashwood gymnasium murmured again.

And then the lights in the Geneva hall dimmed, and a single spotlight fell on the white stage, and a man walked out into it.

* * *

Ethan had imagined him many times.

He had listened to the voice on the radio every night for months — warm, calm, patient, intimate. He had pictured an old man, white-haired and grandfatherly. Or a slick politician with a practiced smile. Or something darker, something with cold eyes and a cruel mouth, something that looked like what Rachel's documents said he was.

He was none of those things.

He was perhaps forty-five. Of medium height, slim, in a plain dark suit with no tie, his collar open. His hair was dark, going gray at the temples, cut short. His face was not handsome, exactly — it was too thin for that, too angular — but it was open and alive and strangely luminous, as though lit from within. When he smiled, which he did as he reached the center of the stage and looked out at the thousands in the hall, it was a shy smile, almost boyish, the smile of a man who was faintly embarrassed by all the attention.

And his eyes.

Even on a forty-inch television screen in a high school gymnasium in Ohio, Ethan could see his eyes. Dark, and deep, and full of something that looked like sorrow — and like kindness — and like a terrible, patient understanding. The eyes of a man who had seen every grief in the world and wept for all of it.

The hall in Geneva rose to its feet and began to applaud.

It went on and on. Kings and presidents and patriarchs, standing, clapping, some of them weeping openly. The man on the stage stood in the spotlight and did not try to stop them. He simply waited, with his hands folded in front of him and his head slightly bowed, as if the applause were for someone else.

In the Ashwood gymnasium, people began to clap too.

Not everyone. But many. A few at first, scattered through the bleachers. Then more. Ethan saw a young mother from the Hollow clapping with tears streaming down her face. He saw Russ Keller, standing near the door, clapping slowly, his heavy face working. He saw old men and teenagers and refugees and farmers, clapping for a man on a television screen who had stopped the guns from falling on their town.

He did not clap. Beside him, Sarah did not clap. Jack stood with his arms folded. Rachel stood absolutely still.

On the screen, the man lifted one hand, very slightly. And the great hall in Geneva fell silent at once, as though a switch had been thrown.

He began to speak.

* * *

"*My friends,*" he said.

He said it in English. Then — without a pause, without a note, in the same warm voice — he said it again in French. Then in Arabic. Then in Mandarin. Then in Spanish, and Hindi, and Russian, and

Swahili, and Hebrew, and in languages Ethan could not recognize, a dozen of them, two dozen, each one flowing perfectly into the next, until the whole hall in Geneva seemed to be holding its breath.

Then he returned to English.

"*I am told that tonight, more people are watching and listening than have ever watched or listened to anything in the history of the human race. Three billion, perhaps four. In palaces and in refugee camps. In cities and in villages. On radios powered by the sun and televisions powered by car batteries, in places where the lights went out many months ago.*"

He smiled gently.

"*I want to speak to all of you. But tonight, I want to speak first to the people of the United States of America.*"

In the gymnasium in Ashwood, more than a thousand people stopped breathing.

"*Nine months ago,*" he said quietly, "*on the most terrible day in human history, your nation was struck down. Your loved ones were taken from you in an instant, by a mystery none of us yet understand. And in the chaos that followed, while you were still reeling from that loss, your cities were destroyed by nuclear fire. Washington. New York. Chicago. Los Angeles. Twenty-three great American cities, and the millions who lived in them.*"

He paused. His eyes glistened in the spotlight.

"*The nations who did this are represented in this hall tonight.*"

The camera cut to the front rows. Ethan saw faces he recognized — leaders of nations he had been taught to fear all his life, sitting in the front row of the Palais des Nations with their heads bowed.

"*I have spent many months speaking with them,*" the man said. "*And tonight, for the first time, they have agreed to do something that no nation has ever done in the history of war.*"

He turned toward the front row and held out his hand.

And one by one, the leaders of the nations that had destroyed twenty-three American cities rose from their seats and climbed the steps to the white stage.

There were five of them. Men Ethan had seen on the news all his life, always from a distance, always behind podiums or reviewing parades. They stood in a row beside the man in the plain dark suit, in the spotlight, in front of three or four billion people, and they looked — Ethan could not believe what he was seeing — they looked *ashamed.*

The first of them stepped forward to the microphone. He spoke in his own language, haltingly, and the translation scrolled across the bottom of the screen.

"*To the people of America. We were afraid. We believed your country was destroyed and would take revenge upon us. We made a terrible decision. We killed millions of innocent people. There is no excuse. There is no forgiveness we can ask for. We ask only that you know that we are sorry.*"

He stepped back. The second leader stepped forward. Then the third. Each of them said nearly the same thing. Each of them bowed his head.

And when the fifth had finished, the man in the dark suit stepped forward, and turned to them, and — one by one — embraced them.

The hall in Geneva erupted.

People were on their feet, weeping, cheering, embracing each other. The Pope was on his feet. The patriarch was on his feet. The camera found a woman in the front rows — a gray-haired woman in a black suit whom the caption identified as the ambassador of the provisional government of Canada — sobbing into her hands.

And in the gymnasium of Ashwood High School, a sound rose from the bleachers that Ethan had never heard before. It was not cheering, exactly. It was not weeping, exactly. It was something in between — a long, rising, broken wave of sound from a thousand throats, the sound of people who had been carrying something unbearable for nine months and had suddenly, for one instant, been allowed to set it down.

He saw a man in the front row of the bleachers — a farmer he knew, Bob Hartman, who had lost a son in Chicago — bury his face in his hands and shake.

He saw Ellen Brooks, sitting in a folding chair along the baseline, pressing her hand to her mouth.

He saw Russ Keller, near the door, with tears running down his heavy face.

And on the screen, the man in the plain dark suit turned back to the microphone, and raised his hand, and the hall fell silent again.

"*Forgiveness,*" he said softly, "*is the beginning of peace. Tonight, the nations have asked forgiveness. And I believe that the people of America — who have always been the most generous people on earth — will find it in their hearts to give it.*"

"*And so I make you this promise. Beginning next month, the nations represented in this hall will provide the United States with a program of relief and reconstruction greater than any in history. Food. Medicine. Fuel. Engineers to rebuild your power grids and your water systems. Doctors to heal your sick. Every American community that joins the new framework of cooperation will be restored. Every one.*"

"*The age of war is ending. The age of division is ending. Tonight, for the first time in history, the nations of the earth are one.*"

He smiled — that shy, boyish, luminous smile.

"*And next month, I will go to Jerusalem. To the city of peace. To the place where three great faiths were born, and where so much blood has been shed in the name of God. And there, I believe, we will finally make a peace that will last not for a week, and not for a year, but for a generation.*"

He lifted both hands.

"*Peace be with you all. Peace, and safety, and a new beginning for the human family.*"

The screen went white with light as the hall in Geneva rose to its feet in a thunderous, endless ovation. The camera pulled back and back, up toward the domed ceiling, until the thousands of people below were only points of color, and the man in the spotlight was a small dark figure at the center of it all, with his arms outstretched.

And behind him, on the vast blue silk banner, the golden seal gleamed.

* * *

The gymnasium did not empty for a long time.

People stayed in their seats, talking in low voices, or not talking at all. Some were still weeping. Some were laughing. Some were arguing — quietly at first, then louder. Ethan heard fragments of it as he moved toward the door.

— never seen anything like it —

— they apologized, they actually apologized —

— Jerusalem, did you hear, he's going to Jerusalem —

— what if Rebecca's wrong? What if he's exactly what he says he is? —

— did you see him hug them? After what they did? That's — that's what Jesus would do, isn't it? —

He stopped.

The woman who had said it was a refugee from the Hollow — thin, gray-haired, wrapped in a blanket, one of the dozens Noah had led to Christ in the gravel pit. She was talking to the woman next to her, her eyes bright with tears.

"*— forgiving your enemies. Loving the people who hurt you. Isn't that what Noah said Jesus did?*"

Ethan felt something cold settle in his stomach.

He looked across the gymnasium and found Rebecca. She was standing near the stage with Samuel and Noah and Isaiah Freeman, and she had heard it too. He could see it in her face.

"'*For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets,*'" Samuel Graves said quietly, beside her, "'*and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.*'"

Nobody answered.

Behind them, the television screen had gone back to blue.

* * *

Iron Ridge — The Manager's House

February 3 — 10:10 p.m.

Marcus Kane had watched it on a sixty-inch screen in the study of the manager's house, with a real satellite link that the Office had installed in January, and a glass of real bourbon in his hand, and Julian Sorensen's voice in his ear on the satellite phone.

"Remarkable, isn't he?" Sorensen said.

Marcus did not answer. He was looking at the screen, where the camera had frozen on the final image: the dark figure in the spotlight with his arms outstretched, and the golden seal behind him.

"The ceasefire holds until midnight on the seventh," Sorensen went on smoothly. "After that, the Office has no further interest in the timing of your operations. Though I would recommend, Colonel, that you complete the Ashwood matter before the Jerusalem summit. The Chairman would prefer that North America be… tidy… by then."

"The Chairman," Marcus repeated.

"The man you just watched." Sorensen's voice was faintly amused. "That's what we call him, internally. He doesn't care for titles."

Marcus took a long drink of bourbon.

"He embraced them," he said. "The men who nuked Chicago. He put his arms around them in front of four billion people."

"Yes."

"You planned that."

"We plan everything, Colonel." A pause. "You of all people should appreciate that."

Marcus said nothing.

"You have four days," Sorensen said. "Use them well. The Office understands that you have… sources… inside Ashwood. I'd suggest you make the most of them."

The line went dead.

Marcus set the phone down on the desk. He sat for a long time, looking at the frozen image on the screen.

Then he heard something behind him. A soft sound. He turned.

Tyler was standing in the doorway in his Browns sweatshirt. He had been watching. Marcus did not know for how long.

The boy's face was pale. His eyes were fixed on the screen — on the dark figure with his arms outstretched, on the golden seal.

"Dad," he said. His voice was barely a whisper. "Mom used to read me a verse. When I was little. When I had bad dreams." He swallowed. "'*Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light.*'"

Marcus stared at his son.

For a long moment, neither of them moved.

Then Marcus Kane reached over and turned off the television, and the room went dark except for the lamp on the desk.

“Go to bed, Tyler,” he said. But his voice was not hard this time. It was only tired.

Tyler went.

Marcus sat alone in the lamplight. He picked up the bourbon, looked at it, and set it down again without drinking.

The Chairman would prefer that North America be tidy.

He thought of Harlan’s Crossing. Of Millbrook. Of Mansfield, and Strickland hanging from the bridge on Park Avenue, and the crowd cheering. Of Carl Haskins at the bottom of the quarry, singing in the dark. Of the white leaflets drifting down over Ashwood like snow.

We plan everything, Colonel.

For the first time since the day he had come home and found Diane’s apron on the kitchen floor, Marcus Kane felt something he did not have a name for. It was cold, and it was small, and it lived somewhere beneath his breastbone.

It felt, a little, like fear.

He picked up the radio on his desk and keyed it.

“Kessler,” he said. “Tell Rourke to go to the jar tonight. I want to know everything. Every position. Every patrol. Every weakness.” He paused. “We move on the eighth.”

* * *

Iron Ridge — The Quarry

February 4 — 2:15 a.m.

Evan Lowe came down the haul road in the dark with a canvas bag over his shoulder and his heart pounding so hard he could hear it.

He had done this four times now. Every time he drew the night guard at the blasting magazine, he waited until the relief went back up the road to the barracks, and then he unlocked the steel door. Just for a minute. Just long enough to push the bag inside — bread, dried apples, a jar of honey he had traded two weeks of tobacco ration for, a pair of wool socks, a candle and three matches.

If Kessler ever found out, they would put him in the blasting magazine too. Or worse.

He unlocked the padlock with shaking hands and pulled the door open a foot. The smell hit him — cold stone and straw and sickness.

“It’s me,” he whispered into the dark. “It’s Evan.”

A shape moved in the blackness. Then Carl Haskins’s face appeared in the gap, gaunt and bearded and gray, his broken nose healed crooked. He had lost thirty pounds. His eyes were sunk deep in his skull.

“Evan.” His voice was a rasp. “God bless you, son.”

Evan pushed the bag through the gap. Carl took it.

“How is everybody?” Evan whispered.

Carl was silent for a moment.

“Pastor Deckard’s dying,” he said. “Pneumonia. He can’t breathe. I don’t think he’ll last the night.” His voice cracked. “He’s been asking what’s happening outside. He keeps asking. Is there news?”

Evan hesitated. Then he told him. The ceasefire. The Week of Peace. The broadcast from Geneva. The man in the dark suit embracing the leaders who had nuked America, in front of four billion people. The relief for every community that joined the framework. Jerusalem next month.

Carl listened without speaking. When Evan was finished, he stood in the gap of the steel door for a long moment in silence.

“Wait here,” he said.

He disappeared back into the dark. Evan heard him moving, heard low voices, heard a thin, rattling, wet breathing that made his skin crawl. Then, faintly, Carl’s voice, repeating what Evan had told him.

And then another voice. Old, and thin, and barely more than a whisper, but perfectly clear in the frozen stillness.

“‘*They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace.*’”

A long, rattling breath.

“*Jeremiah… six…*” the voice whispered. “*Tell them, Carl. Tell anyone… who will listen… there is no peace… but His.*”

Then silence.

Evan stood at the steel door in the dark for a long time. He heard Carl’s voice again, low and broken, and then the voices of the others, and then — very softly, from the blackness at the bottom of the Hollister quarry — the sound of a big man weeping.

Pastor Ron Deckard died at 2:31 in the morning on the fourth of February, on a bed of straw in a bricked-up blasting magazine, with Carl Haskins holding his hand. He was seventy years old. He had been a Methodist minister for thirty-eight years, and a Christian for nine months.

Evan Lowe locked the steel door and climbed back up the haul road in the dark. He did not tell anyone what he had heard.

But he never forgot it.

* * *

First Baptist Church — The Bell Tower

February 4 — 11:20 p.m.

Rebecca found Rachel in the bell tower.

She had been looking for her for an hour — at Samuel's farmhouse, at the pass office, at the clinic. It was Noah who told her, finally, coming down from his watch: *She's up in the tower. She's been up there since dark. She asked me if she could be alone.*

Rebecca climbed the ladder anyway.

Rachel was sitting on the floor of the belfry with her back against the wall, beneath the great iron bell, with a lantern beside her and a Bible open on her knees. It was not the satchel. It was not the Framework. It was the old black Bible that had belonged to Samuel Graves's wife — the one Rachel had been reading, secretly and then not so secretly, since November.

She looked up when Rebecca's head appeared through the trapdoor. Her eyes were red.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know Noah said —"

"It's all right." Rebecca climbed the rest of the way up and sat down on the dusty floor beside her. "You don't have to talk. I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

Rachel laughed shakily. "I'm not okay." She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I haven't been okay since I watched that broadcast."

Rebecca waited.

"I've been a journalist for nine years," Rachel said. "I've interviewed senators and CEOs and cult leaders and serial killers. I know how to read people. I know when someone's lying. I can see it in their eyes, in their hands, in the way they breathe." She stared at the lantern. "And I watched that man for forty minutes last night, and I couldn't see it. I couldn't see anything. He was perfect. Every word. Every gesture. When he embraced those men — I almost believed him. *Me.* After everything. After eighty-seven pages. After Howard Birch died in front of me." Her voice broke. "I almost believed him."

"So did a lot of people."

"I know. That's what terrifies me." Rachel turned a page in the Bible, then turned it back. "I've been reading Daniel. Chapter seven. Chapter eight. Chapter eleven." She looked at Rebecca. "Did you know there's a verse that says he'll understand dark sentences? That he'll come in peaceably and obtain the kingdom by flatteries? That by peace he'll destroy many?" She laughed again, a small broken sound. "It's like reading a profile of him. It's like reading a *source document.* Written two thousand five hundred years ago."

"I know," Rebecca said softly.

"And Revelation. I read Revelation last night after the broadcast. The whole thing. I didn't understand half of it. But I understood enough." Rachel closed the Bible and pressed both hands flat on its cover. "Everything your father said on those tapes. Everything in these books. It's all *true.* It's all happening, exactly the way it says. I've been investigating it for six months without knowing what I was investigating. And I kept thinking — there has to be another explanation. A rational one. A conspiracy. A cabal. Rich men in Geneva. Something I can understand."

She was quiet for a long moment.

“But there isn’t another explanation,” she whispered. “Is there?”

“No,” Rebecca said. “There isn’t.”

Rachel looked down at the Bible in her lap.

“I told Ethan the first night I came here,” she said, “that I didn’t believe in God. I wanted him to know that up front. I made a big point of it.” She shook her head slowly. “I think I’ve been lying to myself for twenty years. Since my mother died. I think I knew. I think I always knew. I just didn’t want Him, because He let her die.” Her voice cracked. “And now I’m sitting in a bell tower in the middle of Ohio, and the whole world is cheering for the Antichrist, and I’m the one who has the documents that prove it, and I *still* didn’t want Him. Not until last night.”

“What changed last night?”

Rachel was silent for a long time. When she spoke again, her voice was very small.

“When that man stood up there in the spotlight with his arms out,” she said, “and four billion people cheered — I looked at him, and I thought: *That’s what I’ve been afraid God was.* Someone who’d smile at you and promise you everything and then take your name and your soul. Someone who planned the whole thing eleven weeks in advance.” She wiped her eyes. “And then I came up here and opened this Bible to the Gospel of John, and I read about a man who knelt on the floor and washed His friends’ feet the night before they abandoned Him. Who let them nail Him to a cross instead of calling down armies. Who didn’t want anything from anybody except for them to come home.”

She looked at Rebecca, and her gray eyes were wet and wide open.

“They’re not the same,” she said. “They’re not even close to the same. The man in Geneva wants the whole world. And Jesus —” Her voice broke completely. “Jesus just wanted *me.*”

Rebecca took her hand.

“He still does,” she said.

Rachel Monroe put her face in her hands and wept.

Rebecca did not say anything else. She did not quote any verses. She did not tell her what to pray. She simply sat on the dusty floor of the bell tower beside her, holding her hand, beneath the great silent bell that her father had sat beneath fourteen months before the world ended, recording the tapes that had led them both here.

After a long time, Rachel began to pray.

She did it the way she did everything — carefully, precisely, in plain words, the way she might have dictated a story to an editor. She told God that she had been wrong. That she was sorry. That she believed His Son had died for her and risen again. That she did not know how to do this, and she was afraid, and she was tired of being afraid alone.

And then she said, very simply, “*I’m Yours. Whatever happens. I’m Yours.*”

When it was over, she lifted her head and looked out through the louvered shutters of the belfry toward the southwest, where the Grange Hall stood dark on its hill six miles away, and the whole world was waiting for the ceasefire to end.

“Three days,” she said softly.

“Three days,” Rebecca agreed.

Rachel was quiet for a moment. Then — for the first time since she had walked into Ashwood out of the snow three months ago — Rachel Monroe smiled. A real smile. Small and tired and utterly unguarded.

“It’s strange,” she said. “I should be more afraid now. I’ve never been less afraid in my life.”

Rebecca smiled back through her own tears.

“‘*Peace I leave with you,*’” she said softly, “‘*my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.*’”

“John fourteen,” Rachel said. “I read that one last night.”

“*Not as the world giveth,*” Rebecca repeated. “That’s the difference, Rachel. That’s the whole difference.”

Far below them, in the dark streets of Ashwood, a patrol passed on its rounds, boots crunching in the snow. A dog barked somewhere and fell silent. And on the courthouse square, in front of the Wall of the Missing, someone had left a single candle burning in a mason jar, small and steady in the cold.

And across the ocean, in a white marble hall in Geneva, the lights were going out one by one after the greatest celebration in human history, and a man in a plain dark suit stood alone on an empty stage, looking up at the golden seal, and smiling.

“*Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.*”

— John 14:27

* * *

END OF CHAPTER 12

PART FOUR — THE BATTLE FOR ASHWOOD

* * *

CHAPTER 13

Betrayal

“*Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me.*”

— Psalm 41:9

* * *

The Keller Residence, Poplar Street

February 5 — 11:50 p.m.

Russ Keller could not stop his hands from shaking.

He sat at the kitchen table in the dark with a yellow legal pad in front of him and a pencil in his fist, and he watched his hands shake, and he could not make them stop. He had tried pressing them flat against the oilcloth. He had tried clenching them into fists. He had tried a glass of the peach brandy he kept hidden behind the flour bin, and then a second glass. Nothing worked.

Upstairs, his wife was asleep. So was his daughter. So were his three grandchildren — Emma, who was six, and Luke, who was four, and baby Owen, eighteen months, who had finally stopped teething and slept through the night for the first time in weeks.

Russ could hear them breathing through the ceiling vent. He had been listening to them breathe for an hour.

On the table beside the legal pad lay a small square of paper. It had been in the pickle jar at the base of the fencepost on Township Road 14 two nights ago, and he had read it so many times that the creases had gone soft.

It was not in block capitals. It was in a neat, firm, slanting hand, written with a good pen.

My friend —

The time has come. The ceasefire ends at midnight on the 7th. On the 8th, the Alliance will move.

I need everything now. Every roadblock and bunker, and how many men at each. Every tower, and what it can see. Where the ammunition is kept. Where the grain is stored — in town and on the farms. Where the medicine is. Where Walker, Reynolds, and Brooks sleep. The patrol schedules and the passwords. The weakest point in the middle ring.

Leave it in the jar by midnight on the 6th.

You have served your family well. On the night of the 8th, tie a white cloth to your front door. My men will know it. No one inside that house will be harmed. You have my word.

— M.K.

A white cloth on the door.

Russ Keller had read his Bible as a boy, in the Lutheran church on Third Street where his mother had dragged him every Sunday until he was old enough to refuse. He knew what that sounded like. The angel of death passing over. The blood on the doorposts.

He had not thought about that in forty years.

He had thought about it every minute since he found the note.

He looked down at the legal pad. At the top of the page, in the careful, deliberate block capitals he had been using since October, he had written a single word:

ROADBLOCKS.

Nothing else.

He had been sitting here for an hour, and he had written one word.

He closed his eyes.

It was supposed to be simple, he thought. *It was supposed to be so simple.*

* * *

It had started in September, with a rider from Millbrook.

Russ had been alone in the co-op office, late, doing ration counts, when a gaunt young man had knocked on the door with a letter from Carl Haskins. *Millbrook needs diesel. Our well is contaminated. Kids are dying. We're asking for help.* The letter had been addressed to the mayor. But the mayor was out at the farms, and Ethan was on patrol, and the rider had seen the light in the co-op window and knocked.

Russ had read the letter. Then he had looked at the fuel ledger on his desk, and done the arithmetic, the way he always did the arithmetic.

We can't spare it, he had told the rider. *I'm sorry. Tell Carl the answer's no.*

He had never told Brooks. He had never told Ethan. He had put the letter in his desk drawer and told himself he was protecting Ashwood.

Six weeks later, Millbrook had stolen all the diesel at the Hadley plant, and Danny Haskins had nearly bled to death on County Road 12.

That was the first thing. He had not known it was the first thing. It had not felt like a beginning.

The second thing had been the jar.

He had found it by accident, in early November — walking home the long way from the Whitaker farm after an argument with Hal about the grain count, cutting across the old cornfield on Township Road 14 because it was shorter. He had stopped to catch his breath beside a gray fencepost, and seen a glint of glass in a knothole near the base.

Ashwood cannot win.

The Colonel rewards those who help him.

If you want to protect your family, leave word here.

He had stood in the cornfield with the note in his hand for a long time.

He had thought about his grandchildren. About the ration counts that got smaller every week. About Walker and his tapes and his Bible verses, and Rebecca Whitfield standing up at town meetings and telling people to trust God while the grain bins emptied. About the night before, on the courthouse lawn, walking home from the co-op, when he had heard two voices on the roof above him in the dark — Walker and that Army intelligence man, Mercer — talking about artillery. *Two M119 howitzers. One-oh-five millimeter. Seven miles.*

He had thought: *They're going to get us all killed. And they're too proud to see it.*

He had gone home, and taken out a yellow legal pad, and written down what he knew in block capitals. He had told himself it was insurance. That it didn't matter — Kane knew most of it already. That he was only buying his family a little protection in case the worst happened.

He had kept telling himself that.

When he wrote down the number of fighters. When he wrote down how much ammunition they had. When he wrote down that Walker and Brooks disagreed. When he walked into First Baptist Church late one night in December — the doors were never locked — and went into the pastor's study, and opened the footlocker, and found the tape labeled *THE JUDAS AMONG US,* and put it in his coat pocket, and walked out. He had never listened to it. He had not been able to make himself throw it away, either. It was in his desk drawer at the co-op, under the letter from Carl Haskins.

He had kept telling himself it was insurance, right up until the night of January twenty-ninth, when his daughter knelt in the snow in front of the courthouse steps with his grandchildren around her and gave her life to Jesus Christ, while an eighteen-year-old boy with stitches in his face prayed over her.

He had stood in that square and watched Jenna weep, and something had broken open inside his chest that he had not been able to close since.

He had not gone back to the jar after that. For a week, he had not gone back.

Then he had found the note from M.K.

You have served your family well.

Upstairs, baby Owen made a small sound in his sleep. Russ heard Jenna murmur something to him through the ceiling. Then silence again.

Russ Keller looked down at the legal pad.

ROADBLOCKS.

If he wrote it, his family would live. Kane had promised. A white cloth on the door. No one inside that house would be harmed.

If he didn't write it — if he tore up the legal pad and burned Kane's note in the stove and went to bed — then on the eighth, Kane would come anyway. With nine hundred men and two howitzers. And he would not care whose door was whose.

It doesn't matter what I do, he thought. *Kane's coming either way. The only question is whether my grandkids are alive when it's over.*

He picked up the pencil.

His hand was still shaking. He pressed it against the paper until the lead nearly broke.

And he began to write.

* * *

Township Road 14 — Watchtower Six

February 7 — 4:10 a.m.

Noah Simmons saw the light at ten minutes past four.

He had been in Watchtower Six since midnight — the tall telephone-pole tower on Township Road 14, at the eastern edge of the middle ring, where he had stood on the day it was finished and read Ezekiel's words about the watchman. He had asked for this post. He did not know why. He had simply felt, every time he climbed the ladder, that he was supposed to be here.

The night was clear and bitterly cold. The moon was down. The stars were brilliant over the white fields, so bright that the snow seemed to glow faintly beneath them. From the tower, Noah could see the dark line of the tree barricade across the township road, and the long empty stretch of road beyond it running off toward the southwest, and the old abandoned cornfield to his left, with its broken rows of frozen stalks poking up through the snow.

And at the far corner of the cornfield, a quarter mile away, a small red light.

It flickered once. Twice. Then went out.

Noah froze.

He raised Jack's binoculars — the good ones, the Army ones — and focused on the spot. At first he saw nothing. Just snow and stalks and darkness. Then his eyes adjusted, and he saw a shape. A man. Crouched at the base of something — a post, a stump — at the corner of the field. He was doing something with his hands. Then he stood, and turned, and began to walk away across the snow — not toward Ashwood. *Away* from it. Southwest, toward the tree line, toward the long empty road that led to Iron Ridge.

He was carrying something under his arm.

Noah keyed his radio with a hand that was suddenly very cold.

"Tower Six to Ortega," he whispered. "Tower Six to Ortega. I've got a man in the old cornfield at the south corner of Township Fourteen. He was crouched by something at the fence line. Now he's heading southwest. Walking. He's carrying something."

A pause. Static.

"*Ortega to Tower Six. Is he armed?*"

"I can't tell. It's too dark."

"*Keep your eyes on him. Don't lose him. I'm coming.*"

Noah kept his eyes on him. He watched the dark shape cross the cornfield and reach the tree line and pause there, just for a moment — looking back, Noah thought, back toward Ashwood — and then slip into the trees and vanish.

He kept watching the spot where the man had been crouching. The corner of the cornfield. The base of something gray and upright, sticking up out of the snow.

A fencepost.

* * *

Luis Ortega reached the fencepost twenty minutes later, with four riders and a lantern.

The man was long gone. His tracks led southwest across the snow to the tree line and disappeared into the woods, where the snow was thin and patchy beneath the hemlocks and the ground was frozen too hard to hold a print. Two of Ortega's riders followed them for a mile and lost them.

But the fencepost was still there. And in the knothole at its base, the pickle jar.

It was empty. Except for a small square of paper, folded in half.

Ortega unfolded it by lantern light. It was written in a neat, firm, slanting hand, with a good pen.

Received. Well done. Your family will be spared. Remember the white cloth. — M.K.

Ortega read it three times. Then he folded it very carefully and put it in the breast pocket of his coat, and knelt in the snow beside the fencepost, and looked at the ground.

The snow around the base of the post was trampled. Two sets of prints. One set — the man Noah had seen — led southwest toward the trees. Narrow boots, maybe size ten, with a lug sole. Military.

The other set was older. Half-drifted over. It came from the *east.* From Ashwood.

Big boots. Heavy. Size thirteen, maybe fourteen, with a worn-out tread and a distinctive cut across the left heel, as though the man had stepped on something sharp once and never replaced the boot.

The heavy prints came to the fencepost from the direction of town, stopped, stood for a long time — long enough to melt the snow down to the frozen dirt — and then turned around and went back the way they had come.

Ortega followed them.

They went east across the cornfield to the township road, and along the road toward the tree barricade, and then, a hundred yards short of the barricade, they turned off into the ditch and followed it north for a quarter mile, around the end of the barricade, through a gap in the woods where the felled trees did not quite meet the old stone fence line.

A gap Jack’s crews had missed.

A gap nobody in Ashwood knew about.

Except whoever had made these tracks.

Ortega stood at the gap in the dark and felt something cold settle in his stomach. Then he keyed his radio.

“Ortega to Reynolds,” he said quietly. “Jack, wake up Walker. And Mercer. We have a problem.”

* * *

The Courthouse Command Center

February 7 — 6:15 a.m.

“Everything,” Jack Reynolds said. “He gave them everything.”

He was standing at the county map with his fists on the walnut table, staring at the lines he had drawn — the three rings, the fourteen roadblocks, the twelve towers, the bunkers, the strongpoints of the inner ring. His face was gray. His jaw was clenched so tight that a muscle jumped in his cheek.

Around him, in the gray light before dawn, sat the council. Ethan. Brooks. Mercer. Sarah. Rebecca. Samuel. Hal. Rachel. Ortega, standing by the door, with the folded note from the pickle jar lying on the table in front of him where everyone could see it.

Your family will be spared. Remember the white cloth.

“We don’t know that it’s everything,” Brooks said.

“He had *time*,” Jack said. “Whoever he is. He had since October, if Mercer’s right about the timeline — since before the refugees came. And he knew about a gap in the tree barricade on Township Fourteen that none of *my* people knew about.” He slammed his fist down on the table. “He knows this town better than I do. He’s walked it. He’s *built* it, maybe. He’s sat in this room.”

Nobody said anything.

“Kane attacks tomorrow,” Jack went on, more quietly. “The ceasefire ends at midnight tonight. And he’s going to come in knowing every position we’ve got. Every bunker. Every tower. Every gap. How many men at each post and when they change shifts. Where the ammunition is. Where the grain is.” He looked around the table. “Where *we* sleep.”

“Can we move them?” Hal asked. “The positions?”

“Some. Not all. Not in eighteen hours.” Jack rubbed his face with both hands. “We can shift the ammunition. We can change the passwords and the patrol times. We can put people somewhere else tonight. But the bunkers are dug. The towers are built. The roadblocks are where the roads are. We can’t pick up the middle ring and put it down somewhere else.”

“Then we fight with what we have,” Ethan said.

“We fight with what we have,” Jack agreed. “Blind. Against a man who can see every card in our hand.”

The room was silent.

Then Daniel Mercer, who had been standing by the window with his arm still in its sling, spoke for the first time.

“The boots,” he said.

Everyone turned.

“Size thirteen or fourteen. Heavy man. Worn tread. A cut across the left heel.” Mercer’s voice was flat and careful. “Luis says he stood at that fencepost long enough to melt the snow to the dirt. That’s ten minutes, maybe fifteen, in this cold. He wasn’t just dropping something off. He was standing there. Thinking. Maybe deciding.” He paused. “A man who stands that long at the edge of a thing like that is a man who isn’t sure he wants to do it.”

“What does that matter?” Jack said. “He did it.”

“It matters,” Mercer said, “because a man who isn’t sure is a man who can still be turned.” He looked around the table. “And because I think every person in this room already knows who it is. We just don’t want to say it.”

Nobody moved.

Ethan looked down at the table. At the note from the jar. At his own hands.

He thought of an empty chair on New Year’s Eve. Of a man who had walked out of the first council meeting in November and been the first to leave the room. Of a man who had set down a pen, unused, beside a letter that ended *As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.* Of a heavy, frightened face in the lamplight of the co-op office, saying *every way I work it, my grandkids end up in a ditch.*

Of a man standing in the courthouse square, watching his daughter kneel in the snow, and then turning and walking away down Main Street, fast, with his head down.

“No,” he said quietly. “I don’t want to say it.”

“Then don’t,” Rebecca said.

Everyone turned to her.

She was sitting at the end of the table with her father’s Bible closed in front of her. Her face was very pale. And beside her, Ethan now saw — how long had she been standing there? — in the doorway of the commissioners’ chamber, in a worn parka, with her face swollen from crying and a cardboard box in her arms, stood a young woman.

Jenna Keller Morrison.

* * *

She had found them at five o’clock that morning.

She had gotten up with the baby, who was fussing, and gone downstairs to warm a bottle on the stove. And in the kitchen, in the gray light before dawn, she had found her father's boots by the back door, still wet with melted snow. And beside them, on the kitchen table, where he had left it when he came in and went upstairs, too exhausted or too sick at heart to put it away — a yellow legal pad.

Most of the pages had been torn out. But the pencil had pressed so hard that the words had come through onto the page beneath. She had held it up to the window, in the first gray light, and read what was pressed into it.

ROADBLOCKS. ROUTE 13 SOUTH — 8 MEN, 2 BUNKERS, CHANGE AT 0600/1800. ROUTE 39 NORTH —

She had read it all. Then she had gone to the drawer in the sideboard where her father kept his papers, and found the other things.

She set the cardboard box on the walnut table now, with shaking hands, and stepped back.

Inside it was a stack of yellow legal pad pages, covered in block capitals, going back to October — drafts, copies, notes her father had kept, perhaps, the way he kept every ledger and every receipt, because he could not help himself. A letter on lined paper, addressed to Mayor Daniel Brooks, dated September, signed *Carl Haskins.* A strip of white cotton cloth, torn from a pillowcase.

And a cassette tape.

It was an old TDK, ninety minutes. The label was written in careful blue printing that everyone in that room had come to know.

TAPE 28 — THE JUDAS AMONG US.

Rebecca made a small sound and put her hand over her mouth.

"I found it in his desk," Jenna said. Her voice was hoarse and trembling. "With the letter. I don't — I don't know what all of it means. I just know what the legal pad says." She looked around the table, and her eyes were full of tears. "He's my dad. He's my *dad.* He taught me to ride a bike. He walked me down the aisle. When Brian vanished, he came and got me and the kids that same night and brought us home." Her voice broke. "He was trying to save us. I know he was. He was trying to save his grandkids. I know that's what he thought he was doing."

Nobody spoke.

"But I can't," Jenna whispered. "I can't let him. Not like this. Not if it means everybody else —" She stopped. She pressed her hands against her face. "Noah said Jesus would never ask us to buy our lives with somebody else's. He said that's what the cross was. Jesus bought our lives with *His.*" She lowered her hands. "I can't tie a white cloth on my door and let my kids live while Kane kills Tess's orphans. I can't. I'd rather die."

She stood in the doorway of the commissioners' chamber, a twenty-six-year-old widow with three children and a father who had sold her town, and wept.

Sarah Collins got up from the table, crossed the room, and put her arms around her.

* * *

The Co-op Office

February 7 — 7:30 a.m.

Ethan went alone.

Jack wanted to go with twenty men. Brooks wanted to go himself. Mercer wanted to question Keller before anyone else spoke to him, the way he had questioned men in Iraq and Afghanistan, with care and patience and a plan.

Ethan listened to all of them. Then he went alone.

He did not know why, exactly. He only knew that if he were Russ Keller — if he had done what Russ Keller had done — he would not want to be dragged out of his office by twenty men with rifles. He would want someone to come and sit down across the desk from him and look him in the eye.

He would want a chance to say it himself.

The co-op office was cold. The stove had gone out. Russ Keller was sitting behind his desk in his heavy wool coat, exactly where Ethan had found him on the night after Mansfield, with the ration ledgers spread out in front of him. He had not been looking at them. He had been looking at the wall.

When Ethan came in, he did not look up.

“Jenna,” he said. It was not a question.

“Jenna,” Ethan said.

Keller closed his eyes.

Ethan sat down in the chair across from him. He did not draw his pistol. He did not say anything. He took Emily’s small green New Testament out of his coat pocket and set it on the corner of the desk, and folded his hands, and waited.

For a long time, the only sound was the wind outside, rattling the loose sheet of tin on the co-op roof.

“October,” Keller said finally. His voice was barely audible. “It started in October. November, really. I found a jar in the cornfield. There was a note.” He swallowed. “I’ll tell you everything. Whatever you want to know. I’ll write it all down. What I gave them. When. Everything I know about what they’re planning.” He opened his eyes and looked at Ethan, and his face was a ruin. “I gave them the whole town, Walker. Last night. Every roadblock. Every tower. The gap in the barricade on Fourteen. Where the ammunition is. Where the grain is. Where you sleep. Where Jack sleeps. Where the mayor sleeps.” His voice cracked. “Where the kids from Mansfield sleep, at Donna’s house. I put that in. God help me. I didn’t even think about it. I was just writing everything down.”

Ethan said nothing.

“He promised,” Keller whispered. “A white cloth on the door. My family spared.” He laughed — a terrible, broken sound. “I’m fifty-eight years old. I ran a grain elevator for twenty years. And I believed

a man who burned a refugee camp and hanged forty men from a bridge when he promised me my grandkids would be safe."

"Why did you do it, Russ?"

Keller stared at him.

"You know why," he said. "You've always known why. You heard me in this office three weeks ago. My grandkids. I did the math. I did the math a thousand times, and every time, they die." His voice rose. "You and Rebecca and Samuel and the rest of you, with your tapes and your prophecies and your *God will provide.* You don't know that. You don't *know* that. You're gambling nine thousand lives on a Bible verse. And I couldn't — I couldn't —" He stopped. He put his face in his hands. "I couldn't gamble theirs."

Ethan looked at him for a long time.

"And now?" he asked quietly.

Keller did not lift his head.

"Now my daughter's knelt in the snow and given her life to Jesus," he said into his hands. "And my grandkids say their prayers every night before bed. Emma prays for *you,* did you know that? She prays for 'Mister Ethan who keeps us safe.' Every night." His shoulders began to shake. "And I sat at the kitchen table last night and listened to them breathing through the ceiling, and I wrote down where you sleep, so Kane's men could come and kill you."

The wind rattled the tin roof.

Ethan reached over and picked up Emily's New Testament. He turned the pages slowly until he found what he was looking for.

"There were two men who betrayed Jesus on the night He was arrested," he said. "Did you know that?"

Keller lifted his head slowly.

"Judas, you know about. He sold Him for thirty pieces of silver." Ethan looked down at the page. "But there was another one. Peter. His best friend. The one who swore up and down that he'd die before he'd ever deny Him. And that same night, when a servant girl pointed at him in the courtyard and said, *you were with Him* — Peter swore he'd never met Him. Three times." He paused. "And then the rooster crowed. And Jesus turned around, and looked at him."

He read aloud.

"'*And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord… And Peter went out, and wept bitterly.*'"

He closed the book.

"Both of them betrayed Him, Russ. Both of them were sorry. The difference is what they did next." Ethan leaned forward. "Judas went out and hanged himself. He couldn't believe he could be forgiven. So he died with it." He paused. "Peter went back. He went back to the others and waited. And three

days later, Jesus came back from the dead, and found Peter on a beach, and cooked him breakfast. And asked him three times — once for every denial — *Do you love Me?* And then He gave him his job back."

Keller was staring at him. Tears were running down his heavy face.

"You're telling me I can be *forgiven?*" he whispered. "After this?"

"I'm telling you that's the only question that matters now," Ethan said. "Whether you're Judas or Peter. Whether you run from it, or you come back."

"And the town? Jack? The mayor? Nine thousand people who are going to wake up tomorrow with Kane at the gate, knowing everything?"

"The town's going to have to decide what to do with you," Ethan said. "That's justice. You'll have to face that. I won't pretend you won't." He stood up. "But God's already decided what He wants to do with you. And that's grace."

He held out his hand.

Russ Keller looked at the hand for a long time. Then, slowly, he reached out and took it, and Ethan pulled him to his feet.

"There's one more thing," Keller said hoarsely. "Something you need to know. Something I figured out from what he asked me for." He wiped his face with his sleeve. "The last note asked for the grain on every farm. Every barn, every crib, every bin. He's not going to hit the town first. Not tomorrow. He's going to hit the *farms.* All around the outer ring. Burn the grain. Take the livestock. Kill whoever resists." He swallowed. "He wants to starve you before he comes in. And I told him exactly where the grain is on every farm."

Ethan went very still.

"When?" he said.

"The first night," Keller said. "Tomorrow night. As soon as the ceasefire ends."

* * *

The Courthouse — Holding Room

February 7 — 2:00 p.m.

The council met in the commissioners' chamber for three hours.

Ethan did not remember most of it afterward. He remembered Jack Reynolds standing at the window with his arms folded and his back to the room, saying in a low, flat, terrible voice, *In any army in the world, he'd be shot.* He remembered Hal Whitaker, whose farm Keller had described in detail to Kane, sitting with his head in his hands and saying nothing at all. He remembered Rachel Monroe reading from the legal pad pages in Jenna's box, one by one, in her careful reporter's voice, until the whole list of everything Russ Keller had given away lay on the table in front of them like an autopsy.

He remembered Mayor Daniel Brooks, at the end of the third hour, taking off his glasses and setting them down on the walnut table.

“We are not going to shoot him,” Brooks said quietly.

Jack turned from the window.

“Daniel —”

“We are not going to shoot him,” Brooks repeated. His voice did not rise. “Marcus Kane shoots people. Marcus Kane hangs them from bridges and drags them out of their beds at night and throws them into quarries. That’s what Kane does. It’s what Kane *is*.” He looked around the table. “If we take Russ Keller out behind this courthouse and shoot him, then we’ve just told nine thousand people that Ashwood is the same as Iron Ridge, only with better hymns.”

“He sold us, Daniel,” Jack said. “He sold every man, woman, and child in this town.”

“I know what he did.” Brooks’s voice was very tired. “I read the legal pad too. I saw where he wrote down which bedroom Ellen and I sleep in.” He was quiet for a moment. “He’ll be held. Locked up. Under guard. After this is over — if any of us are still alive — he’ll stand trial, in front of the whole town, in the open, and the town will decide what to do with him. That’s justice.” He looked at Jack. “That’s what we’ve been fighting for this whole time. Not just to survive. To survive as *ourselves*.”

Jack Reynolds looked at the mayor for a long, long moment.

Then his shoulders sagged, very slightly.

“You’re a hard man to argue with, Mayor,” he said.

“So I’m told,” Brooks said.

* * *

They put Russ Keller in the holding room in the basement of the courthouse — the same windowless concrete room where Travis Boone had sat ten days before, on the same steel bench.

Rebecca went down to see him at two o’clock.

She did not go alone. Samuel Graves went with her, leaning on his cane, and Noah Simmons, and Jenna. Ortega unlocked the door for them and stood outside it with his rifle.

Keller was sitting on the steel bench with his elbows on his knees and his big hands hanging between them. He looked up when they came in, and his face crumpled when he saw his daughter.

Jenna crossed the room and sat down on the bench beside him and put her arms around him. She did not say anything. He did not say anything. He simply leaned against her, this enormous, heavy, broken man, and shook.

Rebecca stood in the doorway with the cassette tape in her hand.

When Keller finally lifted his head, he saw it.

“You found it,” he said hoarsely.

“Jenna found it,” Rebecca said. “In your desk.”

“I never listened to it.” Keller stared at the tape. “I took it because — I don’t know why I took it. I heard the title. Somebody from the youth group said it out loud at the ration line — *there’s a tape called The Judas Among Us.* And I thought, if anybody in town hears that, they’ll start looking. So I went into the church one night and took it.” He shook his head slowly. “I couldn’t throw it away, though. I tried. I couldn’t make myself do it.”

“Do you want to hear it?” Rebecca asked.

Keller looked at her for a long time.

“Yes,” he whispered.

Noah had brought a small battery-powered cassette player. He set it on the steel bench. Rebecca slid the tape into it and pressed the button, and stepped back.

The speaker hissed. A pigeon cooed faintly, somewhere in the recording. Then the voice filled the small concrete room — warm, unhurried, touched with the faint Kentucky drawl.

“*This is a hard tape to make. I’ve put it off for a long time. But the Lord won’t let me leave it out.*”

“*If you’re listening to this, you’re part of a remnant. A small band of believers, trying to stay faithful in the worst days the world has ever seen. And I have to tell you something that I wish I didn’t have to tell you. Somewhere among you — maybe now, maybe later — there’s going to be someone who betrays you.*”

Keller flinched as if he had been struck.

“*It’s always been this way. Jesus chose twelve men, and one of them was Judas. David had his Ahithophel — his closest counselor, the man he trusted most, who went over to his son Absalom when the rebellion came. David wrote about him in Psalm forty-one: ‘Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me.’ And Jesus quoted that very verse at the Last Supper, when He told His disciples that one of them would betray Him.*”

“*So don’t be surprised. Don’t be afraid. And for heaven’s sake, don’t turn on each other. Don’t start seeing a traitor behind every face. That’s exactly what the enemy wants.*”

A pause on the tape. The rustle of pages.

“*But I’m not really making this tape for the rest of you. I’m making it for him.*”

Russ Keller went absolutely still.

“*If you’re the one — if you’re the Judas among them — I want to talk to you now. Just you.*”

“*I don’t know your name. I don’t know what you’ve done. But I know why you did it. Because it’s always the same reason. You were afraid. You looked at the numbers, and you looked at the enemy, and you looked at the people you love, and you decided that God couldn’t be trusted to take care of them. So you decided to take care of them yourself. And you sold somebody else to do it.*”

Keller made a sound. Jenna tightened her arms around him.

“*I understand that. I’m not going to pretend I don’t. I’ve been a pastor for thirty years, and I’ve seen good men do terrible things out of fear. I’ve done some myself.*”

“*But I want you to hear me. Please. Listen.*”

“*You’re not Judas yet.*”

“*Judas didn’t become Judas when he sold Jesus. Peter sold Him too, that same night, with his mouth. Judas became Judas when he decided he couldn’t be forgiven. When he walked away from the only One who could forgive him, and went out and hanged himself in the dark.*”

“*You don’t have to do that. The door’s still open. It’s open right now, while you’re listening to this. Jesus said to Peter, ‘Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.’*”

“*He’s praying for you, friend. Right now. He’s been praying for you the whole time.*”

“*Come home. Tell the truth. Face whatever you have to face. And let Him carry the rest.*”

“*And to the rest of you, the ones he betrayed —*”

The voice paused. When it went on, it was very gentle.

“*— pray for him. Forgive him, if you can. Because he’s more lost than any of you. And because every one of you, if you’re honest, knows you could have been him.*”

The tape hissed on for a few seconds. Then clicked.

Nobody moved.

In the concrete room in the basement of the courthouse, Russ Keller slid off the steel bench onto his knees on the cold floor. He put his face down against the bench, with his daughter’s hand on his back, and wept the way Ethan had seen men weep only a handful of times in his life — with his whole body, from somewhere so deep inside him that it seemed to have no bottom.

Samuel Graves lowered himself slowly, painfully, onto his old knees on the concrete floor beside him, and laid one gnarled hand on his shoulder.

“Go on, Russ,” the old man said softly. “Tell Him. He’s listening.”

And Russ Keller did.

* * *

The Courthouse Roof

February 7 — 11:40 p.m.

The council had done what it could.

In the eighteen hours since Luis Ortega found the note in the pickle jar, Ashwood had changed every password and every patrol schedule. Jack had moved the main ammunition store from the grain elevator to three separate cellars scattered across town. The leaders had moved out of their own houses

— Ethan to a cot in the courthouse, Brooks and Ellen to the Graves farmhouse, Jack to nowhere at all, because he did not intend to sleep. The nineteen children from Mansfield had been moved from Donna Pierce's house on Maple Avenue to the basement of the Methodist church, where Tess Albright sat up with them by lantern light, reading them stories.

The gap in the tree barricade on Township Road 14 had been closed with twenty more felled oaks and a new bunker.

And riders had gone out to every farm in the outer ring with the same message: *Kane is coming for the farms first. Tomorrow night. Move what grain you can into town. Move the livestock if you can. Get your families to safety. Ring the bells at the first sign.*

It was not enough. Ethan knew it was not enough. You could not move a winter's worth of grain from forty farms in eighteen hours. You could not hide a thousand head of livestock. You could not change the shape of the land.

But it was what they had.

He stood on the courthouse roof in the freezing dark and watched the minutes run down toward midnight.

Jack was beside him, with his binoculars. Rebecca, with her father's Bible. Rachel, with a notebook she was no longer writing in. Sarah, who had come up from the clinic for a few minutes and had not gone back. Mercer, with the shortwave radio, turning the dial slowly through the static.

Nobody spoke.

Out in the dark, the watchtowers of the middle ring stood against the stars, and beyond them, out in the fields, the lanterns of the farm watch posts glowed like fallen stars in the snow. Every one of them had a bell. Every one of them was waiting.

At 11:58, the voice came on the radio.

Mercer turned up the volume.

"*…and so, as the Week of Peace comes to an end, I want to thank every nation, every people, every soldier who laid down his weapon for these seven days. You have shown the world what is possible. You have shown that peace is not a dream. It is a choice.*"

"*The ceasefire ends at midnight. But my hope is that it will not end in your hearts. I ask you — I beg you — do not return to the old ways. Do not pick up your weapons again. Choose peace. Choose unity. Choose the new world that is waiting for all of us.*"

"*Goodnight. And peace be with you.*"

Static.

Mercer turned it off.

The courthouse clock, which had not worked since April, did not strike midnight.

But at 12:03 a.m. on the eighth of February, far out in the dark to the southwest — past the middle ring, past the Township 9 watchtower, out where the Marsh farm lay in its hollow beneath the snow — a single bell began to ring.

Three times. Then three times again.

Raiders.

Then another bell, farther west. The Hartman place. Three rings. Three rings.

Then another. And another.

And then, all at once, the bells began to ring continuously — wild and frantic and overlapping, from farm to farm to farm, around the whole southern and western edge of the outer ring, ringing and ringing and ringing, until the night was full of their clamor.

And on the horizon, low in the southwest, where the Marsh farm lay, a small orange light bloomed in the darkness.

Then another. And another.

Fire.

Jack Reynolds lowered his binoculars. His face in the starlight was like stone.

"It's started," he said.

Beside him, Rebecca Whitfield opened her father's Bible by the faint light of the burning horizon and read aloud, in a voice that shook but did not break:

"*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? When the wicked, even mine enemies and my foes, came upon me to eat up my flesh, they stumbled and fell. Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear: though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident.*"

— Psalm 27:1–3

And Ethan Walker turned, and went down the ladder, and into the night.

* * *

END OF CHAPTER 13

CHAPTER 14

Fire on the Farms

"*The field is wasted, the land mourneth; for the corn is wasted: the new wine is dried up, the oil languisheth.*"

— Joel 1:10

* * *

The Marsh Farm — Township Road 9

February 8 — 12:01 a.m.

Tom Garrison was asleep in the bunkhouse when the dogs started barking.

He had been living on the Marsh farm since the first week of December, when he and Lily came out of quarantine at the fairgrounds and Ed and Linda Marsh took them in. The bunkhouse was a narrow white building behind the machine shed, built for hired hands back in the days when a farm this size still hired hands. It had two iron bedsteads, a wood stove, a single window, and a calendar on the wall from a seed company in 2019. Lily slept in the bed by the stove with Mr. Buttons tucked under her chin. Tom slept in the bed by the door.

He had slept by the door every night since Mansfield.

The dogs were barking — both of them, Ed's old border collie and the young Lab — the high, frantic, continuous barking that meant something was wrong. Tom was on his feet before he was fully awake, pulling on his boots in the dark, reaching for the shotgun Ed had lent him in January and taught him how to use.

Then he heard the bell.

It was the big iron dinner bell on a post beside the Marsh farmhouse porch, the one Jack Reynolds's people had told every farm to ring at the first sign of trouble. Somebody was hauling on the rope, hard. Three rings. Three rings. Three rings.

Then a gunshot. Then another.

Then the bell stopped.

"Daddy?"

Lily was sitting up in bed with the rabbit clutched against her chest, her eyes enormous in the dark.

"Get your coat on, baby," Tom said. His voice was steadier than he felt. "Get your coat and your boots. Fast as you can. Don't turn on the light."

He went to the window.

The farmyard was full of horses. Twenty. Thirty. More coming down the lane from the road, riders in dark clothing with rifles, their breath smoking in the lantern light that spilled from the farmhouse windows. Two pickup trucks with their headlights off rolled into the yard behind them. Men were jumping down from the truck beds with red plastic gasoline cans.

On the farmhouse porch, beneath the dinner bell, someone was lying on the boards, not moving.

Tom could not see who it was. He did not need to. Ed Marsh was the only one who would have been out there ringing it.

"Oh, God," he whispered. "Oh, God, oh, God."

Across the yard, men were running toward the corn crib — the long, slatted wooden building beside the barn where Ed had stored four thousand bushels of ear corn, most of what the Marsh farm had harvested in October. Tom watched them splash gasoline along its sides. He watched one of them strike a match.

The crib went up with a sound like a great breath drawn in. Orange light flooded the farmyard, throwing the shadows of horses and men across the snow.

Then the barn. Then the hay shed.

He could hear the cattle bawling in the barn. He could hear men shouting, laughing, whooping. He could see riders driving Ed's Holsteins out of the pasture gate and down the lane toward the road, cracking whips, while the cows lowed and stumbled and slipped in the snow.

"Daddy." Lily was beside him, in her coat and her boots, with Mr. Buttons stuffed inside the front of her parka. "Daddy, what's happening?"

He looked down at her. Seven years old. She had already watched one home burn.

Not again, he thought. *God, please. Not again.*

"We're going to go out the back window," he said. "Quiet as mice. And we're going to run to the tree line. You remember the tree line, where we picked up sticks for the stove? Behind the bunkhouse?"

Lily nodded.

"You run there, and you hide in the big hollow log, and you don't come out for anybody but me. Not anybody. Okay?"

"What about Mrs. Marsh?"

Tom looked at the farmhouse. The windows were lit. He could see shadows moving inside. He could see men on the porch, stepping over the body by the bell.

Linda Marsh was sixty-four years old. She had taken a stranger and his daughter out of a refugee camp and given them a home and fed them at her table every night for two months, and never once asked for anything back.

"I'm going to get Mrs. Marsh," Tom said. "You go to the log."

* * *

He never quite remembered how he did it.

He remembered getting Lily out the back window and watching her run, small and dark against the snow, toward the tree line two hundred yards away. He remembered going around the far side of the machine shed, where the fire had not reached yet, with Ed's shotgun in his hands and his heart pounding so hard he thought it would crack his ribs. He remembered the back door of the farmhouse kitchen, standing open, and the smell of kerosene.

He remembered Linda Marsh in the kitchen, in her flannel nightgown, standing between two men with rifles and the door to the cellar stairs — where Ed had stored their winter's canning, three hundred jars of tomatoes and beans and peaches — with a cast-iron skillet in her hands.

He remembered one of the men raising his rifle.

He remembered the shotgun going off in his hands, and the kick of it against his shoulder, and the man spinning and falling, and the other man turning toward him, and firing, and missing, and Tom firing again.

And then silence, except for the roar of the fire outside and Linda Marsh's ragged breathing.

He stood in the kitchen doorway with the empty shotgun in his hands, staring at the two men on the linoleum floor. Neither of them moved. One of them was very young. Nineteen, maybe. He had freckles.

Tom Garrison had been an accounts manager at a heating and cooling company in Mansfield. He had never fired a gun at a living thing in his life before January.

"Tom," Linda Marsh said. Her voice was very quiet. "Tom, we have to go."

He looked at her.

"Ed's on the porch," she said. Her face was white and perfectly still, the way faces go when the grief is too big to fit inside them yet. "I heard him ringing the bell. And then I heard the shots. And then the bell stopped." She set the skillet down on the kitchen table, very carefully, as if it might break. "We have to go, Tom. Where's Lily?"

"The tree line," he whispered.

"Then let's go to the tree line."

They went out the back door together. Behind them, the flames from the barn had jumped to the machine shed, and from the machine shed to the bunkhouse, and the whole Marsh farm was burning, lighting up the snow for a mile in every direction, throwing a pillar of orange smoke up into the black February sky.

Out in the fields, far away, other bells were ringing.

* * *

The Courthouse — Ashwood

February 8 — 12:15 a.m.

"They want us to come out," Jack said.

He was standing at the top of the courthouse steps with a field radio in each hand and a map of the outer ring spread out on the limestone at his feet, lit by a red-shielded flashlight. All around him, the square was filling with volunteers — the mounted reaction force, forty riders on farm horses, their rifles across their saddles, their breath rising in clouds. Beyond them, on every horizon to the south and west, the sky glowed orange.

“That’s the whole point of this,” Jack went on. “Burn the farms. Make it ugly. Make it loud. Ring every bell in the county. And wait for us to send every rider we’ve got out into the dark to save them.” He shook his head. “And then hit us on the roads, where Keller told them we’d be.”

“We can’t just let them burn, Jack,” Ethan said.

“I know.” Jack’s jaw was clenched. “I know we can’t.” He looked down at the map. “So we go. But we don’t go the way they expect. Keller gave them our patrol routes. He gave them the main roads and the times. So we don’t use the main roads.” He tapped the map. “We go cross-country. Fence lines. Creek beds. Woodlots. The farmers know every inch of this ground. Kane’s men don’t. And we don’t go to the fires.” He looked up. “We go to where the fires are going *next.*”

Ethan stared at him.

“Keller gave them the grain,” Jack said. “Every crib and bin on every farm. That’s their target list. So we know exactly where they’re headed.” He jabbed his finger at the map, one farm after another, moving north and east from the Marsh place. “Marsh. Then Hartman. Then Lindquist. Then Voss. Then Whitaker. Then the Graves place. They’re working in a circle, coming around toward town. So we don’t chase them. We get *ahead* of them.”

“And the town?”

“The town stays manned.” Jack looked out at the square. “Every bunker. Every tower. Every man at his post. If this is a feint — and it might be — Kane’s going to hit the middle ring while we’re out chasing fires. I’m not giving him the chance.” He turned to Ethan. “You take twenty riders. East, to the Voss dairy. Luis takes twenty, north, to the Whitaker place. I stay here.” He paused. “And Ethan — Samuel’s farm. Brooks and Ellen are sleeping out there. Rachel. That mail carrier from the Hollow. And fifty refugees in the hay barn.”

“I know.”

“Keller didn’t know they’d moved there,” Jack said. “Brooks and Ellen. He wrote down the house on Maple Avenue. But he knew about the barn. He wrote down the barn.”

Ethan swung up onto his horse.

“Then I’m going to the Graves place,” he said.

* * *

The Voss Dairy — Route 39 North

February 8 — 1:40 a.m.

Evan Lowe had been given a gasoline can and an order.

The barn, Sergeant Hendricks had said, pointing across the frozen barnyard at the long red dairy barn with its white trim and its gambrel roof. *Burn it. The cows too. Colonel wants them starving by spring.*

Evan stood in the snow at the side of the barn with the red plastic can in his hand and did not move.

The barn was full of cows. He could hear them through the walls — sixty Holsteins and Jerseys in their stanchions, shifting and lowing uneasily at the smell of smoke from the hay barn across the yard, which was already burning. He could hear the milk cans rattling. He could hear a calf bawling for its mother.

Across the yard, by the farmhouse, the rest of his squad had a man on his knees in the snow at gunpoint. A big, heavyset farmer in long johns and a John Deere jacket, with his hands on his head. Beside him, on her knees too, a woman in a bathrobe with her arms wrapped around a teenage girl. Beyond them, a younger man in a T-shirt stood with his hands raised, and behind him, in the farmhouse doorway, a young woman clutching a baby.

The Voss family, Evan thought. Hendricks had read the name off his list. *Gary Voss. Dairy. Sixty head. Grain bin, 2,000 bushels. Hay barn.*

Evan's own family had kept a dairy once, in Harlan's Crossing, before his father died and his mother sold the cows to pay the funeral bills. He had grown up in a barn like this one. He knew the smell of it — warm milk and hay and manure and the sweet, heavy breath of cattle. He had names for every cow his father ever owned.

He had been ten years old when they sold them. He had cried for a week.

"*Lowe!*" Hendricks's voice cracked across the yard. "*What are you waiting for? Light it!*"

Evan looked down at the gasoline can.

He thought about the blasting magazine at the bottom of the quarry, and the old man singing *Amazing Grace* in the dark, and the sound of Carl Haskins weeping. He thought about the last words Pastor Deckard had whispered through the steel door: *There is no peace… but His.*

He thought about his little sisters in Harlan's Crossing, eating Kane's rations, because Evan wore Kane's uniform.

And he thought about sixty cows burning alive in their stanchions, bawling and screaming, while the family who milked them knelt in the snow and watched.

"*Lowe!*"

Evan unscrewed the cap on the gasoline can.

Then he walked around the corner of the barn, out of Hendricks's sight, to the big sliding door on the far end. He set the can down in the snow. He grabbed the iron handle of the door and hauled on it with all his strength, and it rumbled open on its rusty track, and the warm, milky breath of sixty cows poured out into the freezing night.

He went in. He went down the row of stanchions in the dark, pulling pins, slapping flanks, shouting. *Hup! Hup! Go on! Get!* The cows stumbled backward out of their stanchions, confused and frightened, and he drove them down the center aisle toward the open door, the way his father had taught him, the way he had done a thousand times as a boy. They poured out through the door into the night and scattered across the snowy pasture, bawling, their breath steaming, sixty dark shapes running away from the fire.

Then he came back out, and picked up the gasoline can, and splashed it along the side of the empty barn, and lit it.

When Hendricks came around the corner a minute later, the barn was burning, and the cows were gone.

“Where are the cattle?” Hendricks demanded.

“They broke out, Sergeant,” Evan said. His voice was steady. He did not know how. “Must have smelled the smoke. Kicked the back door open before I could get to it.” He pointed at the dark pasture. “They’re scattered all over the place. Want me to go round them up?”

Hendricks stared at him for a long moment in the firelight.

Then he spat in the snow.

“Forget the cows,” he said. “We’re behind schedule. Mount up.”

Evan Lowe walked back across the yard toward his horse. As he passed the farmhouse, he glanced — just once — at the family kneeling in the snow.

The teenage girl in her mother’s arms was looking straight at him. Freckled. Fierce. Sixteen, maybe. She was staring at him with an expression he did not understand, until he realized that she had seen. She had been watching from the farmhouse, and she had seen him open the back door of the barn and drive the cows out into the dark.

Hannah Voss looked at the boy in the Iron Alliance uniform, and very slightly, so that no one else could see, she nodded.

Evan looked away and kept walking.

* * *

The Graves Farm — Hillside

February 8 — 2:05 a.m.

Ethan heard the screaming from half a mile away.

He came up over the rise north of the Graves farm at a dead gallop, with twenty riders strung out behind him across the snowy fields, cutting cross-country through a gap in the fence line that Samuel had shown him in December. And below him, in the hollow, the Graves farm was burning.

Not the house. The house stood white and whole on its knoll, every window lit. But the big red hay barn behind it — the one Samuel had said you could fit fifty people in, the one where fifty refugees from Ontario and the Hollow had been sleeping on straw since November — was on fire.

The whole south wall was a sheet of flame. The roof was beginning to catch. Smoke was pouring out of the loft doors, thick and black and full of sparks. And he could hear them inside. Screaming. Banging on the walls. Someone was pounding on the big sliding door on the north end, over and over, and it was not opening.

Because someone had chained it shut.

Ethan saw the chain from fifty yards away as he came down the hill — a heavy logging chain looped twice through the iron handles of the barn door and padlocked. And across the barnyard, riding away toward the road, a dozen dark figures on horseback, not even looking back.

They locked them in.

The thought went through him like a blade of ice. *They chained the door and set the barn on fire with fifty people inside.*

"*Bolt cutters!*" he roared. "*Somebody get bolt cutters! Axes! Anything!*"

Then he saw Samuel Graves.

The old man was already at the barn door. Seventy-four years old, in his long johns and a barn coat thrown over them, with no hat and no gloves, standing in front of the chained door with a splitting maul in his gnarled hands. He swung it. It struck the padlock with a clang that rang across the yard. He swung it again. And again.

Beside him, in a bathrobe and bare feet, Daniel Brooks was hacking at the barn wall beside the door with a hatchet — not at the chain, at the *wall*, at the old weathered boards, trying to cut a hole big enough for people to crawl through.

And beside Brooks, in a flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up and his face black with smoke, Dale Kirby — the mail carrier from Diamond Street, whose wife and son had burned alive in Mansfield — was kicking at the boards with his bare heel, over and over, screaming at the people inside. "*Get back! Get back from the wall! We're coming! We're coming!*"

Ethan was off his horse before it stopped moving.

He ran to the barn wall. He had no axe, no hatchet, nothing but his rifle. He reversed it and slammed the butt against the boards beside Brooks's hatchet. The wood splintered. He slammed it again.

Behind him, his riders were piling off their horses, running, shouting, grabbing anything they could find — a pitchfork, a crowbar, a length of fence post. Someone found the axe from Samuel's woodpile. Someone else found a sledgehammer in the machine shed.

The heat was unbearable. The smoke was so thick that Ethan could barely see the boards in front of his face. His eyes were streaming. His lungs were burning.

And then, with a crack like a gunshot, the padlock on the chain gave way under Samuel Graves's maul.

The chain slithered to the ground. A dozen hands grabbed the iron handle of the sliding door and hauled. It rumbled open.

And fifty people came pouring out of the burning barn into the snow — coughing, choking, screaming, stumbling, carrying children, dragging the old and the sick. Women in nightgowns. Men with their hair singed. A little boy with his pajamas on fire, and a rider from Ethan's column tackling him into a snowbank and rolling him until the flames went out.

Ethan grabbed an old woman who had fallen in the doorway and dragged her clear. He went back and got a teenage boy who was carrying his little sister. He went back again.

On the fourth time, Samuel Graves grabbed his arm.

“That’s all of them,” the old man said hoarsely. “I counted. Fifty-one. They’re all out.”

Ethan stared at him. Samuel’s face was black with soot. His white hair was singed. His gnarled hands, the ones that had swung the maul, were bleeding.

Behind them, with a long, slow, groaning roar, the roof of the hay barn fell in, and a great column of sparks rose up into the night sky.

“Fifty-one,” Ethan said.

“Fifty-one,” Samuel repeated. And then the old farmer sat down very suddenly in the snow, as though his legs had simply stopped working, and began to laugh and cry at the same time.

* * *

It was Rachel Monroe who found out how the raiders had known about the barn.

She did not need to find out. She already knew. She stood in the snow in the firelight with a blanket around her shoulders and a notebook in her hand — she had been writing, even now, even here, because it was the only thing she knew how to do when the world stopped making sense — and she said it out loud, very quietly, to no one in particular.

“The legal pad,” she said. “Keller’s legal pad. Page four. *GRAVES FARM — HAY BARN — 50 REFUGEES SLEEPING. 600 BU. SOYBEANS IN BIN.*”

Beside her, Daniel Brooks stood barefoot in the snow in his bathrobe, with the hatchet still in his hand, staring at the burning barn.

“He didn’t tell them to burn it with people inside,” Brooks said. His voice was strange. “Russ didn’t. He just wrote down that they were there.”

“No,” Rachel said. “He just wrote down that they were there.”

Brooks closed his eyes.

“*The chain,*” he whispered. “Somebody brought a chain.”

Ellen came across the yard from the farmhouse with an armful of quilts and put one around her husband’s shoulders. Brooks did not seem to notice. He was still staring at the fire.

“I wanted to be merciful,” he said. “I wanted to be better than Kane. I stood in that room and said we’d give Russ a trial.” He looked down at the hatchet in his hand. “And they chained fifty people in a barn and set it on fire.”

Ellen put her arms around him.

“You *are* better than Kane, Danny,” she said quietly. “That’s why you were out here with a hatchet, and he was twenty miles away in his big brick house.” She pressed her face against his shoulder. “Don’t let him take that from you too.”

* * *

The Courthouse Square — Ashwood

February 8 — 9:00 a.m.

The sun came up on a ring of smoke.

From the courthouse roof, Ethan could see it on every horizon to the south and west — columns of gray and black smoke rising straight up into the still, cold morning air from the farms of the outer ring, a dozen of them, twenty, like the pillars of some vast ruined temple. The smell was everywhere. Burning hay, burning grain, burning wood. And under it, faint and sickly sweet, another smell he did not let himself think about.

Hal Whitaker gave them the numbers in the commissioners' chamber at nine o'clock.

He read them from a sheet of paper in a flat, dead voice, standing at the head of the walnut table with his seed-company cap in his other hand. He did not look up once.

"Twenty-three farms hit. Fourteen burned — barns, cribs, sheds. Six houses burned. Four of them with people in them." He swallowed. "Grain lost — about sixty percent of what was stored on the farms. That's roughly twenty-two thousand bushels of corn and beans, give or take. Livestock taken or killed — four hundred and ten head of cattle. Two hundred hogs. The chickens, mostly. The horses they could catch."

He turned the page.

"Seventeen dead. Eleven of them defenders — farmers and volunteers who fought back. Six civilians." His voice cracked for the first time. "Ed Marsh. Bob Hartman. Bob's wife, Joyce. Two of the refugee families at the Lindquist place, in the bunkhouse — they didn't get out." He stopped. "Doc Lindquist's wounded. He's at the clinic. Sarah says he'll live."

Nobody spoke.

"We saved some," Hal went on. "Luis got to my place before they did. We held the crib. The Voss dairy lost its hay barn and its grain, but somehow the cows got out — Gary says they kicked the barn door open. Samuel's hay barn is gone, but everybody in it lived." He looked up for the first time. His eyes were red. "We moved maybe eight thousand bushels into town yesterday, before it started. That's in the elevator and the church basements now."

"How long?" Brooks asked quietly.

Hal looked down at the paper.

"With what's in town, and what we saved on the farms, and cutting rations to half of what they are now —" He took a breath. "The twenty-fifth of February. Maybe the first of March."

Seventeen days. Maybe twenty-one.

"That's what he wanted," Mercer said quietly, from the window. "He's not trying to beat us. He's trying to make us watch the calendar."

* * *

The Courthouse — Holding Room

February 8 — 11:30 a.m.

Russ Keller had heard.

Everyone in the courthouse had heard. The bells had rung all night. The smoke had come in through the ventilation grates. And at dawn, Luis Ortega had come down the stairs to the holding room, exhausted and black with soot, and opened the door, and told Russ Keller exactly what had happened — the Marsh farm, the Hartman place, the Lindquist bunkhouse, the chained barn at the Graves farm.

He had not said it cruelly. He had simply said it. Then he had closed the door and locked it again.

Now Ethan stood in the doorway and looked at the man on the steel bench.

Keller had not slept. That much was obvious. He was sitting exactly where he had been sitting the night before, with his elbows on his knees and his face gray and his eyes fixed on the concrete floor. When Ethan came in, he did not look up.

“The barn,” he said. His voice was a rasp. “The Graves barn. With the chain.”

“Everyone got out,” Ethan said. “All fifty-one.”

Keller closed his eyes. His whole body shook once.

“I wrote it down,” he whispered. “I wrote down that they were sleeping there. I didn’t — I never thought —” He stopped. “What did I think, Walker? What did I think Kane was going to *do* with it?”

Ethan did not answer.

For a long time, neither of them spoke.

Then Keller lifted his head.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” he said. “Something I haven’t told anybody. Not even Jenna.” He swallowed. “The co-op annex. The old one, behind the elevator, that we stopped using in 2008. There’s a cellar under it. Concrete. Dry. Sealed.” He looked up at Ethan. “In September — right after the Millbrook rider — I started moving grain into it. At night. By myself. A few bags at a time. I told myself it was insurance. For my family. If things got bad.”

Ethan stared at him.

“How much?” he said.

“Nine hundred bushels of seed corn,” Keller said. “The good stuff — hybrid, from the co-op’s own stock. And four hundred bushels of wheat. And about six hundred pounds of dried beans.” His voice broke. “It’s not on any list. Kane doesn’t know about it. Hal doesn’t know about it. Nobody knows.”

“Why are you telling me now?”

Keller looked at him for a long moment. His heavy face was wet.

“Because I’ve been sitting in this room all night listening to that tape in my head,” he said. “*You’re not Judas yet.*” He wiped his face with the back of his hand. “I hoarded it for my family, Walker. The same

way I sold the town for my family. And my family's the one that brought it to you." He shook his head slowly. "I don't want to be Judas. I want to be Peter. I don't know if I can be. But I want to." He took a ragged breath. "So take it. All of it. The seed corn especially. Hal's going to need it in April, or there won't be anything to plant."

Ethan did not say anything for a long moment.

Then he crouched down in front of the steel bench, so that his face was level with Russ Keller's.

"Thank you, Russ," he said quietly.

Keller stared at him.

"It doesn't fix it," Keller said. "Nothing fixes it."

"No," Ethan agreed. "It doesn't fix it." He stood. "But it's a start. That's how Peter started, too. With breakfast on a beach."

* * *

Hal Whitaker opened the cellar under the old co-op annex at two o'clock that afternoon, with Ethan and Jack and a crowbar.

When the concrete hatch came up and Hal shone his flashlight down into the darkness and saw the neat stacked rows of grain sacks — hundreds of them, dry and whole and untouched — the old farmer did not say anything at all for a long time.

Then he took off his seed-company cap and held it against his chest.

"Nine hundred bushels of seed corn," he said hoarsely. "That's two hundred acres. Maybe more." He looked up at Ethan. "That's next summer, Ethan. That's the harvest. I thought we'd lost it. Kane burned every seed crib in the outer ring last night. I thought we'd have nothing to put in the ground." His voice broke. "And it was sitting here the whole time. Under our feet."

"'*I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten,*'" Ethan said softly.

Hal looked at him.

"Joel two," Ethan said. "Rebecca read it to me this morning. After the fires." He looked down into the cellar. "God's got a strange way of doing things, Hal."

"That He does," the old farmer said. "That He surely does."

* * *

The Lindquist Farm — County Road 12

February 10 — 1:15 a.m.

The trap was Jack's idea.

"Keller told them where the grain was," he said, standing over the map in the commissioners' chamber on the afternoon of the ninth, after a second night of fires had taken the Sutter orchard and the Lindquist smokehouse and two more barns on the western edge of the outer ring. "So they're working

off his list. And they're going to keep working off his list, because it's the best intelligence they've got." He tapped a farm on the map. "So we give them what's on the list."

The Lindquist farm, on County Road 12, had been hit on the first night. The raiders had burned the smokehouse and the bunkhouse and taken the livestock. But they had not reached the big steel grain bin at the back of the property, because Doc Lindquist had come out of the house with a deer rifle and held them off until he was wounded and they ran out of time.

Keller's legal pad listed the bin: *LINDQUIST — STEEL BIN — 3,000 BU. CORN.*

"They'll come back for it," Jack said. "They didn't get it the first time. It's on the list. And it's the biggest single store of grain left in the outer ring." He looked around the table. "So on the third night, we'll be waiting."

The bin was empty. Hal's crews had moved every kernel into town on the afternoon of the eighth. But Kane's men didn't know that.

* * *

They came at 1:15 in the morning, exactly as Jack had predicted — twenty-five riders and two trucks, coming up County Road 12 from the south with their headlights off, turning into the Lindquist lane. They came fast and confident. They had done this for two nights now. They had burned eleven farms. They were not expecting anyone to be waiting.

Forty of Jack's riflemen were waiting.

They were lying in the snow along the fence lines on both sides of the lane, and in the loft of the Lindquist machine shed, and in a shallow trench scraped out of the frozen ground behind the empty grain bin, where Luis Ortega lay with his father-in-law's old Remington and Hannah Voss lay beside him with her .22. Jack lay at the head of the lane behind a stone wall, with a radio and a flare gun.

He let the riders come all the way into the farmyard. He let the trucks pull up beside the bin. He let the first men jump down with their gasoline cans.

Then he fired the flare.

It went up into the black sky with a hiss and burst into white light directly above the farmyard, turning night into noon. Twenty-five riders and a dozen men on foot froze in the sudden glare, blinking, exposed, with nowhere to go.

"*You are surrounded!*" Jack's voice rang out across the yard. "*Put down your weapons! Put them down now, and nobody dies tonight!*"

For a long, terrible second, nobody moved.

Then someone — Ethan never knew who — fired.

And the Lindquist farmyard exploded.

* * *

It lasted four minutes.

Ethan was in the loft of the machine shed with six riflemen, and he would remember those four minutes for the rest of his life — the white glare of the flare drifting down on its parachute, the horses screaming and rearing, the flat crack of rifles from every fence line, the answering fire from the yard, the bullets thudding into the shed walls around him. He would remember firing, and firing again, and not knowing if he had hit anyone. He would remember the flare going out and a second one going up. He would remember a man in the yard below him throwing down his rifle and falling to his knees in the snow with his hands in the air, and then another, and then another.

And then it was over.

Nine of Kane's raiders were dead in the Lindquist farmyard. Four more were wounded. Twelve had thrown down their weapons and surrendered. The rest had escaped down County Road 12 in one of the trucks.

Ashwood had lost one man. A retired schoolteacher named Glen Pruett, sixty-one years old, who had taught high school biology for thirty years and volunteered for the militia on the first day Jack asked. He had been shot through the chest behind the fence line on the east side of the lane. He died in Luis Ortega's arms before the second flare went out.

Two more were wounded. Neither badly.

Ethan climbed down from the loft on shaking legs and walked out into the farmyard, where Jack's volunteers were collecting weapons and binding the prisoners' hands with baling twine.

One of the wounded raiders was lying in the snow near the grain bin, clutching his thigh, with blood seeping between his fingers. Jack's medic was kneeling over him, cutting away his trouser leg. He was young — twenty-two, maybe — with a shaved head and a sergeant's stripes on his camouflage sleeve.

Ethan glanced at the name tape sewn on the chest of his uniform, in the light of the medic's flashlight.

BOONE.

* * *

Ashwood High School — Clinic

February 10 — 5:40 a.m.

Travis Boone came to the clinic at dawn.

Someone had told him. Ethan never learned who. But at twenty minutes to six, while Sarah Collins was finishing the last of the stitches in Sergeant Cody Boone's thigh on the steel table on the gymnasium stage, the gym door opened and a thin, pale nineteen-year-old in a Cleveland Indians cap came in and stood at the edge of the basketball court, staring at the stage.

Cody saw him first.

The wounded sergeant turned his head on the steel table and looked across the gymnasium, and for a long moment neither of the brothers moved.

"Travis?" Cody said. His voice was hoarse. "Travis, what — what are you *doing* here?"

Travis walked slowly across the gym floor. He stopped at the foot of the stage steps. His face was working.

“I live here,” he said. “Remember? Me and Mom. On Locust Street.” He swallowed. “You were out there burning our farms.”

Cody stared at him.

“I didn’t know,” Travis said. His voice cracked. “I didn’t know it’d be you. I heard they caught some guys at the Lindquist place. I heard one of them was a sergeant named Boone.” He took a ragged breath. “I set the church on fire, Cody. Two weeks ago. I poured gasoline all over the basement and lit it. Because Kane’s paper said if there weren’t any preachers, you wouldn’t have to come. You wouldn’t have to shoot anybody. And nobody would shoot you.” He laughed — a broken, terrible sound. “And you came anyway. And they shot you anyway.”

Cody Boone lay on the steel table with Sarah’s hands still working on his leg and stared at his little brother.

“You burned a *church?*” he whispered. “For me?”

“There were kids inside,” Travis said. “I didn’t know. They almost died.” He wiped his face. “And the kid who runs the youth group — Noah — he came to see me in the jail. After. He forgave me. He gave me a tape.” He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a scorched cassette. *TAPE 14 — THE PRODIGAL SON.* “I’ve listened to it about fifty times.” His voice broke completely. “He said he’d pray for you. Every day. Until this was over. He said it right to my face, in the jail, after I tried to burn him alive.”

Cody Boone stared at the tape in his brother’s hand for a long time.

Sarah tied off the last suture. She set down her instruments. She looked at Travis, and then at Cody, and then she quietly stepped back behind the bedsheet curtain and left them alone.

“Mom?” Cody said finally.

“She’s okay,” Travis said. “She’s hungry. Everybody’s hungry. But she’s okay.” He hesitated. “She prays for you too. Every night. She got saved at the courthouse, last month, when Noah preached.”

Cody closed his eyes. A tear ran out from under his lashes and down the side of his face onto the steel table.

“Travis,” he said. “Come here.”

Travis climbed the stage steps. And the wounded sergeant of the Iron Alliance reached up with one hand and grabbed his little brother by the front of his coat and pulled him down, and held him, and wept.

* * *

Ethan came in an hour later, with Jack.

Cody Boone was sitting up on a cot in the corner of the gym, with his leg bandaged and propped on a pillow, and his brother asleep in a chair beside him. When Ethan and Jack came over, Cody looked up at them warily.

“You’re Walker,” he said.

“I’m Walker.”

“And you’re the Ranger.” Cody looked at Jack. “Reynolds.”

“That’s right.”

Cody looked down at his brother, asleep in the chair. Then back up at them.

“I’m not supposed to tell you anything,” he said. “Name, rank, that kind of thing. That’s what they told us. If we got caught.”

“We’re not going to make you,” Jack said quietly.

Cody looked at him for a long time.

“You’re going to let me live,” he said. It was almost a question. “After I burned your farms.”

“You’ll stand trial,” Ethan said. “When this is over. Same as everybody. But yes. We’re going to let you live.”

Cody Boone was silent for a long time. He looked down at the scorched cassette tape that his brother had left lying on the blanket beside him.

“Kane doesn’t let anybody live,” he said finally. “Not when they say no. You know that, right? You know about the quarry?”

“We know,” Ethan said.

Cody nodded slowly. Then he took a deep breath, like a man stepping off a ledge.

“The farms were only the first part,” he said. “Three nights. Burn the grain, take the stock, make you bleed. Draw your fighters out. Wear you down.” He looked up at Jack. “Tomorrow night, the guns start. Tolliver’s going to shell the town from the Grange Hall. All night. He’s got the courthouse and the grain elevator and the high school already plotted. And the bunkers on the middle ring. Keller’s list.” He swallowed. “And the night after that — or the one after — when you’re exhausted and half your people are in the basements and your roadblocks are blown to pieces — the Colonel’s coming in. All nine hundred. From three directions at once.”

The gymnasium was very quiet.

“Which three?” Jack asked.

“South, on Route 13. West, on County Road 12. And east —” Cody hesitated. “East, on Township Fourteen. Through the gap in the trees. The one Keller told them about.”

“We closed that gap,” Jack said. “Night before last.”

Cody looked at him.

“Then you’d better hope the Colonel doesn’t know that,” he said.

* * *

The Courthouse Roof

February 11 — 6:10 p.m.

The sun went down over a ring of smoke.

The fires on the farms had mostly burned out. What was left was a gray haze that lay across the whole countryside to the south and west, softening the edges of everything, turning the setting sun into a dull red disk that sank slowly into the smoke like a coal into ash.

Ethan stood on the courthouse roof and watched it go.

Below him, the town was moving. Families carrying blankets and lanterns and jars of water toward the church basements. Children holding their parents’ hands. Tess Albright herding her nineteen orphans down the steps of the Methodist church. Noah’s youth group running between the shelters with armloads of bread. Jack’s volunteers at every barricade and every bunker, rifles ready, faces set.

Nobody was panicking. That was the thing he would remember. Nobody was running. They were simply going, quietly and steadily, to the places they had been told to go, carrying the things they had been told to carry, as though they had been preparing for this night their whole lives.

Maybe they had.

Rebecca came up through the hatch and stood beside him. She had her father’s Bible, as always. She did not open it.

“Is Sarah at the clinic?” he asked.

“She’s at the clinic. With Tess and Dr. Fitch and Megan. They’ve moved the sickest ones into the old band room — it’s got no windows, and it’s half underground.” Rebecca paused. “She said to tell you to come down off this roof when the shelling starts, or she’ll come up here and drag you down herself.”

“She would, too.”

“She absolutely would.”

They stood together in silence and watched the red sun sink into the smoke.

“I keep thinking about Joel,” Rebecca said after a while. “The whole book. The locusts come, and they eat everything — the grain, the vines, the fig trees. The whole land is stripped bare. And the priests are weeping between the porch and the altar. And everybody thinks it’s the end.” She looked out at the smoke. “And then God says, ‘*I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten.*’ And then He says something else. Right after that. ‘*And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions.*’”

She looked at Ethan.

“After the locusts, Ethan. Not before. After.”

Ethan looked out at the burned farms, and the smoke, and the dark hills to the southwest where the Grange Hall stood with its guns uncovered.

“*After*,” he repeated softly.

“After.” Rebecca opened her father’s Bible then, at last, to the place where it always fell open — Psalm 46 — and read aloud in the red light of the setting sun.

“*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof.*”

Far to the southwest, on the crest of the hill six miles away, a single light blinked on. Then another. Then another.

And then, faint and far away, rolling across the frozen fields like distant thunder, came a sound that no one in Ashwood had ever heard before.

A deep, flat, heavy *boom.*

Then a long, rising whistle, high overhead, coming closer.

“*Be still, and know that I am God,*” Rebecca read, her voice steady. “*I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth. The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.*”

— Psalm 46:10–11

* * *

END OF CHAPTER 14

CHAPTER 15

The Long Night

“*Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day.*”

— Psalm 91:5

* * *

The Courthouse Roof — Ashwood

February 11 — 6:14 p.m.

The first shell fell short.

Ethan heard it coming — a long, tearing whistle, rising in pitch, rushing toward him out of the red dusk like a train coming down a tunnel — and then it struck a snow-covered soybean field a half mile south of town, and the ground jumped.

He saw it before he heard it. A fountain of black earth and white snow leaping up out of the field, higher than a house, lit orange from inside for an instant. Then the sound arrived — not a bang, but a *crack*, flat and enormous, that hit him in the chest like a fist and rattled the windows of every building on the courthouse square.

Then silence. Dirt pattering down onto the snow.

"Short," Jack said beside him, very calmly. He had his binoculars up. "Four hundred yards short. He's finding his range."

"Jack —"

"The next one'll be closer. The one after that, closer still. He's walking them in." Jack lowered the binoculars. "Tolliver knows what he's doing. Three or four rounds, and he'll be on target."

"Then get off this roof," Rebecca said.

Both men turned. She was standing at the top of the ladder with her father's Bible clutched against her chest and her face white.

"Sarah said," she added, her voice shaking only slightly. "And I agree with her. Get off this roof. Both of you. *Now*."

The second shell was already coming. Ethan heard the whistle begin, far away in the southwest, rising.

He grabbed Rebecca's arm and pushed her toward the hatch. Jack was right behind him. They went down the ladder so fast Ethan barely touched the rungs, dropped into the third-floor hallway of the courthouse, and threw themselves flat on the old marble floor.

The shell hit the grain elevator.

Ethan felt it through the floor — a deep, heavy concussion that shook the whole courthouse on its foundations and brought plaster raining down from the ceiling. Every window on the south side of the building exploded inward at once in a glittering storm of glass. Somewhere below, someone was screaming.

When he lifted his head, the hallway was full of dust, and through the empty window frames at the end of it, he could see the grain elevator three blocks away — the tall concrete silos, the steel headhouse on top — and a column of black smoke and orange fire pouring out of a jagged hole in the side of the headhouse.

"The grain," Rebecca whispered, lying beside him on the marble. "Ethan, the grain —"

"I know."

Jack was already on his feet, radio in hand, shouting into it. "*Fire brigade to the elevator! All units, take cover! This is not a drill! Everybody into the shelters! Everybody —*"

The third shell was coming.

* * *

First Methodist Church — Basement Shelter

February 11 — 6:40 p.m.

The basement of the First Methodist Church of Ashwood had been built in 1923, of fieldstone and poured concrete, with walls two feet thick and a ceiling of heavy oak beams. It had been a Sunday school, a fellowship hall, a polling place, a Boy Scout meeting room, a wedding reception hall, and — for one terrible week in 1974, when a tornado came through the south end of the county — a storm shelter.

Tonight, it held three hundred and forty people.

They sat on folding chairs and on blankets on the concrete floor, packed so closely together that there was barely room to move. Old people along the walls. Mothers with babies. Families huddled together under quilts. And in the far corner, beneath a faded felt banner that read **JESUS LOVES THE LITTLE CHILDREN,** nineteen orphans from Mansfield, sitting in a tight circle on a pile of blankets around Donna Pierce.

The kerosene lanterns hung from hooks in the oak beams. Every time a shell landed, they swung.

Donna had been a realtor for twenty-two years. She had sold half the houses in Ashwood. She had never had children of her own. Her husband had died of a heart attack in 2020, and she had spent the next five years alone in the big house on Maple Avenue, selling other people's homes and going to church on Sundays and wondering, sometimes, late at night, what exactly the point of it all had been.

She was not wondering tonight.

"— and so the king's men took Daniel," she was saying, her voice steady and warm and pitched to carry just to the children, "and they threw him into a big stone pit full of lions. Hungry lions. With big teeth. And they rolled a stone over the top so he couldn't get out."

"Did the lions eat him?" whispered a five-year-old girl named Rosie, pressed against Donna's side.

"Well," Donna said, "that's what the king thought would happen. The king was so worried he couldn't sleep all night. And first thing in the morning, he ran down to the pit and called out, *Daniel! Daniel! Is your God able to save you from the lions?*"

Somewhere outside, far away, a shell landed. The floor trembled. The lanterns swung. A baby started crying on the other side of the basement.

Nineteen small faces turned up toward the ceiling, eyes wide.

Donna did not look at the ceiling. She looked at the children.

"And do you know what Daniel said?" she asked.

Nineteen heads shook.

“He said, ‘*My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions’ mouths, that they have not hurt me.*’” Donna smiled. “He was just fine. Not a single scratch. Because God was in that pit with him the whole night long.”

Another shell. Closer. The whole church shook. Dust sifted down from between the oak beams like flour. Mateo, the two-year-old, buried his face in Donna’s lap and began to wail.

Donna picked him up and held him against her chest and rocked him.

“God’s in this basement too,” she said softly, to all of them. “Right here. All night long. Just like with Daniel. He’s not going to leave us.” She kissed the top of Mateo’s head. “Now. Who knows *Jesus Loves Me?*”

Rosie raised her hand.

“Then you start,” Donna said. “And we’ll all sing with you.”

And in the basement of the First Methodist Church, while the shells fell on Ashwood, a five-year-old girl from Mansfield began to sing in a thin, wavering, off-key voice:

“*Jesus loves me, this I know…*”

And eighteen other children sang with her. And then Donna. And then the mother with the crying baby on the other side of the basement. And then an old man along the wall. And then everyone — three hundred and forty people in a stone basement beneath a church in the dark, singing a Sunday-school song while the ground shook around them.

“*Little ones to Him belong; They are weak, but He is strong.*”

Rebecca Whitfield came down the basement stairs in the middle of the second verse, gray with plaster dust, with her father’s Bible under her arm. She had been running from shelter to shelter since the first shell fell — the Baptist church, the Lutheran church, the old bank vault, the high school band room — checking on each one, praying with whoever needed it, moving on.

She stopped at the bottom of the stairs and stood there, listening.

Then she leaned against the stone wall, and closed her eyes, and sang with them.

* * *

Ashwood High School — The Band Room

February 11 — 8:20 p.m.

The band room was half underground — a long, windowless concrete space dug into the hillside behind the gymnasium, where forty years of Ashwood Wildcats marching bands had practiced their fight songs. The walls were still lined with instrument lockers. A bass drum with a faded wildcat painted on its head sat in the corner beneath a stack of folded blankets.

Sarah Collins had turned it into an operating room in four hours.

Two surgical tables — the steel table from the veterinary clinic, and a butcher's block from the co-op kitchen — stood under a bank of car headlamps wired to a string of batteries. Along the walls, on cots and on the floor, lay the wounded. There were eleven of them already. There would be more.

"Next," Sarah said.

Megan Torres and a volunteer carried a man in on a stretcher and laid him on the butcher's block. He was a farmer from the south end of the county, one of the fire brigade who had been fighting the blaze at the grain elevator when the second shell landed thirty yards away. His left arm was a ruin of torn cloth and blood from the elbow down.

Sarah looked at it for three seconds. Then she looked at Tess Albright, standing across the table with a tray of instruments.

Tess had worked the emergency department at Mercy General for nineteen years. She did not need to be told.

"Tourniquet's holding," Tess said quietly. "Pulse is thready. He's lost a lot."

"Get a line in him. Saline. The last two bags." Sarah was already scrubbing her hands in a basin of boiled water. "Dr. Fitch, can you take the next one? The boy with the leg?"

"Already on it," said Warren Fitch from the other table. He was seventy-three years old, and his hands did not shake at all.

Another shell landed, somewhere close. The band room trembled. The headlamps flickered. A cymbal on a stand in the corner, forgotten since the last marching band practice in April, shivered and rang faintly, a single thin shimmering note in the dark.

Sarah picked up a scalpel.

She did not pray out loud this time. She did not have time. But as she bent over the farmer's shattered arm beneath the flickering headlamps, she prayed in her heart, the way she had learned to pray in the barns in November — not in words, exactly, but in something deeper than words. *Lord. My hands. Your hands. Guide them.*

"*I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.*"

She began to cut.

* * *

The Route 13 Roadblock — South Middle Ring

February 11 — 10:50 p.m.

The shelling stopped at a quarter to eleven.

It did not taper off. It simply stopped, all at once, in the middle of a salvo, and the silence that fell over the south end of Ashwood was so sudden and so complete that Luis Ortega could hear his own heartbeat.

He was lying in the sandbagged bunker behind the Route 13 roadblock — the big one, the one Hal's crews had built out of railroad ties and corrugated steel and ten thousand sandbags. Beside him lay Hannah Voss with her .22, and beyond her, two farmers with deer rifles, and a former line cook from the Applebee's on Route 42, and Reggie — the janitor from Mercy General, fifty-eight years old, with his fire axe leaning against the sandbags beside him and an old pump shotgun in his hands.

In front of them, a hundred yards south, the roadblock itself — two overturned school buses and a double row of steel hedgehogs across the highway, backed by concrete barriers. And beyond that, the long dark ribbon of Route 13 stretching south into the night.

"Why'd they stop?" Hannah whispered.

Ortega did not answer. He was listening.

Then he heard it. Faint, far away, beneath the ringing in his ears. Engines. Diesel. More than one. And under the engines, another sound — a steady, muffled, rhythmic crunching, like a great many boots walking on frozen snow.

"Because they're coming," he said quietly. He keyed his radio. "Ortega to Reynolds. Route Thirteen. Ground attack. I hear vehicles and infantry. South of the roadblock. Maybe half a mile."

"*Reynolds to Ortega. Copy. Hold your fire until they reach the hedgehogs. Make every round count. I'm sending you twenty more rifles.*"

Ortega set down the radio and settled his father-in-law's Remington against his shoulder. He looked down the line of the bunker at the others — the farmers, the cook, the janitor, the sixteen-year-old girl — their faces pale and set in the faint starlight.

"Breathe in," he said softly. "Breathe out. Halfway. Hold."

Hannah Voss nodded. Her freckled face was calm.

"Slow is smooth," she whispered back. "Smooth is fast."

* * *

They came out of the dark at eleven-oh-six.

First the armored truck — a big six-wheeled thing, some kind of converted National Guard vehicle, painted dark green with steel plates welded over its windows and a heavy machine gun mounted on its roof. It came up Route 13 at a steady crawl with its headlights off, and behind it, spread out across the highway and the fields on both sides, came the infantry. A hundred and fifty men. Maybe more. Moving in short rushes, from cover to cover, the way men move who have been trained.

The truck reached the first row of hedgehogs and stopped.

Its driver tried to push through. The engine roared. The front bumper slammed into the welded railroad rails with a screech of steel on steel. The hedgehog tipped — and did not fall. It dug its lower spikes into the frozen asphalt and held, and the truck ground against it, and stopped again.

"*Now,*" Ortega said.

The bunker opened fire.

Ortega did not remember much of the next forty minutes afterward. He remembered the machine gun on the armored truck opening up, and the sandbags in front of him jumping and spilling as the rounds tore into them. He remembered firing, and working the bolt, and firing again, and seeing a man in the field to the left of the highway go down. He remembered Hannah beside him, firing her .22 — *crack, crack, crack* — steady and unhurried, as if she were shooting at paper targets in her father's back pasture.

He remembered the twenty extra rifles arriving from town, spilling into the trenches on either side of the bunker, and the whole south line lighting up with muzzle flashes.

He remembered the moment when the infantry reached the school buses. When they were climbing over them, dozens of them, and firing down into the trenches, and he thought, *This is it. This is where we lose.*

And he remembered Reggie.

The old janitor from Mercy General stood up in the bunker with his pump shotgun, in full view of the enemy, and began to walk forward. Not running. Walking. Out of the bunker, across the thirty yards of open snow between the trenches and the buses, firing the shotgun as he went, working the pump, firing again — straight at the men coming over the top.

"*Reggie!*" Ortega screamed. "*Reggie, get down!*"

Reggie did not get down. He reached the side of the nearest bus, and emptied the shotgun into the men on top of it, and then dropped the empty gun and picked up his fire axe.

The men on top of the bus fell back.

Behind Reggie, with a roar, twenty Ashwood volunteers came up out of the trenches and followed him.

* * *

The attackers broke at 11:48.

They did not rout. They were too well trained for that. They pulled back in good order, the way they had come — short rushes, from cover to cover, back across the fields and down the highway into the dark, dragging their wounded with them. The armored truck backed away from the hedgehogs with its engine screaming, one of its front tires shredded, trailing smoke.

In the sudden silence, Luis Ortega climbed out of the bunker on shaking legs and walked across the snow to the school buses.

Reggie was sitting against the side of the nearest bus with his fire axe across his knees. He was smiling. His eyes were open.

He had been shot four times.

Ortega knelt in the snow beside him and closed his eyes with two fingers.

“*Greater love hath no man than this,*” he said softly, in Spanish and then in English, the way his grandmother used to say it at funerals in the little Catholic church in Toledo where he had grown up. “*That a man lay down his life for his friends.*”

He stayed there on his knees for a long time.

Behind him, in the bunker, Hannah Voss sat with her back against the sandbags and her rifle across her knees, and wept silently, with her hands pressed over her mouth.

* * *

The Courthouse — Holding Room

February 12 — 12:30 a.m.

Russ Keller had heard every shell.

He had sat on the steel bench in the windowless concrete room in the basement of the courthouse and felt each one through the floor — the long approaching whistle, the flat crack, the shudder that ran up through the concrete into his bones. He had heard the windows shatter on the south side of the building above him. He had heard the screaming in the street. He had heard the fire brigade’s bells, and the shouts, and the running feet.

He had counted. Fifty-seven shells, so far. He had counted every one.

The courthouse. The grain elevator. The high school. The bunkers on the middle ring.

He had written every one of them down on a yellow legal pad.

The door opened. It was not Ortega this time. It was a young volunteer Keller did not know, with a rifle and a lantern and a face streaked with soot.

“They said to check on you,” the volunteer said. “Make sure you’re okay. The building took a hit on the south side.”

“I’m okay,” Keller said hoarsely. “The grain elevator. Did it —”

“Half burned. The fire brigade saved the other half.” The young man hesitated. “They hit the high school, too. The gym. The roof’s gone over the stage. Nobody was in it — Dr. Collins moved everyone to the band room.” He paused. “And the courthouse square. The Wall. A shell landed right in front of it.”

Keller stared at him.

“The Wall of the Missing?” he whispered.

The volunteer nodded. “Pictures are everywhere. All over the square. In the snow.” His voice caught. “Mine are out there somewhere. My mom and my little brother.” He looked away. “I’ve gotta go. They need everybody on the line.”

“Wait.” Keller stood up. His legs were shaking. “Please. Let me help. I can carry things. I can dig. I can put out fires. Anything.” He took a step toward the door. “I know I don’t — I know what I did. I know nobody wants me out there. But please. I can’t sit in here and listen to it anymore. I can’t.”

The young volunteer looked at him for a long moment.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Keller,” he said finally. “Orders are, you stay here.”

He closed the door. The lock clicked.

Russ Keller stood in the middle of the concrete room in the dark.

Then he got down on his knees on the cold floor, and put his hands together, and did the only thing left that he could do.

“Lord,” he whispered. “Protect them. Please. Protect them from what I did.”

Far away, through the concrete, the whistle of another shell began to rise.

* * *

The County Road 12 Roadblock — West Middle Ring

February 12 — 1:40 a.m.

“They’re hitting the old positions,” Daniel Mercer said.

He was lying on his belly in the snow at the top of a low rise behind the County Road 12 roadblock, with his good arm propping up a pair of binoculars and his wounded arm still in its sling. Ethan lay beside him. Below them, a quarter mile to the west, the second ground attack of the night was hammering at Ashwood’s middle ring.

Or rather — at where Ashwood’s middle ring *had been,* three days ago.

“Look,” Mercer said, handing Ethan the binoculars. “The bunker at the Hartman lane. The one Keller wrote down. They’ve been pouring fire into it for twenty minutes.”

Ethan looked. In the flickering light of flares and muzzle flashes, he could see the old sandbagged bunker at the corner of the Hartman lane, three hundred yards south of the roadblock — the one Jack’s crews had built in January. Kane’s men had it surrounded on two sides. They were firing into it from every direction. One of them had just thrown something through its firing slit, and the bunker flashed and shuddered.

It was empty.

It had been empty since the afternoon of February seventh, when Jack Reynolds read the list on Keller’s legal pad and moved every man at that bunker two hundred yards north, into a new trench line dug in a single night behind a stone wall at the edge of the Lindquist woodlot. A trench line that did not appear on any list.

A trench line that was now, at this very moment, pouring rifle fire into the flank of Kane’s men as they attacked the empty bunker.

“They don’t know,” Mercer said softly. There was something almost like wonder in his voice. “They’re fighting the map Keller gave them. And the map’s wrong.” He shook his head slowly. “Jack moved just enough. Not everything. He couldn’t. But just enough.”

Below them, in the firelight, Ethan watched Kane’s men realize it. He watched them turn, confused, toward the fire coming from the woodlot on their flank. He watched a squad try to wheel around to face it, and get caught in the open, and go down.

He watched the whole attack falter, and hesitate, and stop.

“Keller’s list got them here,” Mercer said. “Every road, every bunker, every tower. He handed Kane the whole town.” He lowered the binoculars. “And three days of changes just turned it into a trap.”

Ethan did not answer. He was thinking of a heavy, broken man kneeling in the dark in a concrete room beneath the courthouse.

Protect them from what I did.

He did not know that Keller had prayed it. He would not know until much later.

But he would always wonder, afterward, whether that was part of why.

* * *

Township Road 14 — Watchtower Six

February 12 — 3:25 a.m.

Noah Simmons had been in Watchtower Six since sundown.

He had asked for it. Again. Jack had tried to send him to the shelters with the other teenagers — *You’re eighteen, Noah, you’re a preacher, not a soldier, I need you alive* — and Noah had looked at him and said, very quietly, *Mr. Reynolds, I’m the one who saw the man at the fencepost. I’m the watchman. Please let me watch.*

Jack had looked at him for a long moment. Then he had handed him the Army binoculars and a radio and a flare gun and said, *If you see anything, you ring that bell like the world’s ending. Then you get down that ladder and you run. You don’t fight. You hear me? You run.*

Now, at 3:25 in the morning, Noah saw something.

It was very faint. Out in the dark to the southeast, beyond the tree barricade on Township Road 14 — beyond the new felled oaks that Jack’s crews had dropped across the old gap three nights ago — a line of shapes moving through the trees.

Men. A lot of them. Coming quietly. No lights. No engines. Walking in single file through the woods, toward the place where the gap in the barricade used to be.

The gap Keller had told them about.

Noah watched them through the binoculars for ten seconds, counting. Thirty. Fifty. Eighty. More behind them, still coming out of the trees.

He lowered the binoculars. He thought about Cody Boone lying on a cot in the gymnasium, saying *East, on Township Fourteen. Through the gap. The one Keller told them about.*

He thought about Ezekiel. *Son of man, I have made thee a watchman unto the house of Israel.*

He thought about Jack. *You ring that bell like the world's ending.*

He grabbed the bell rope and pulled.

* * *

The column in the woods was a hundred yards from the old gap when the bell in Watchtower Six began to ring.

It rang wild and loud and continuous, clanging across the frozen fields, and a moment later a flare burst over the woods — white and blinding, lighting up the trees and the snow and the long single-file column of men caught in the open between the trunks.

And in front of them, where the gap in the tree barricade should have been, where Russ Keller's legal pad had promised them a clear path straight into the heart of Ashwood, there was a wall of fallen oaks twenty feet deep — and behind it, a new bunker, dug into the frozen ground three nights before.

Travis Boone was in that bunker.

He had volunteered the morning after his brother was captured. He had walked into the courthouse and asked Jack Reynolds for a rifle, and Jack had looked at him — at the boy who had burned the church — for a long time, and then handed him one. *You'll be on Township Fourteen,* Jack had said. *The new bunker. The one your brother warned us about.*

Now Travis stood in the new bunker behind the wall of felled oaks with a deer rifle in his hands, and looked out at the column of men frozen in the white light of the flare. Kane's men. Men who might have served with Cody. Men Cody might have trained.

He did not want to shoot them.

He raised his rifle anyway.

But before he could fire, before anyone in the bunker could fire, a voice rang out across the snow from the line of men in the woods — a voice Travis would remember for the rest of his life.

"*Pull back! Pull back! It's closed! The gap's closed! They knew! Pull back!*"

And the column of men in the woods turned, and ran.

They did not fire a single shot. They melted back into the trees the way they had come, scattering, crashing through the underbrush, their shapes flickering in the dying light of the flare, until they were gone.

In the bunker, nobody moved.

Then the old farmer beside Travis — a grizzled, silent man named Earl Sutter whose orchard had burned three nights before — let out a long breath and lowered his rifle.

“Well,” he said. “I’ll be dogged.”

In Watchtower Six, forty feet above the fields, Noah Simmons let go of the bell rope and sank down onto the plank floor with his back against the sandbags and his whole body shaking, and began, very quietly, to laugh and to cry and to pray all at the same time.

* * *

Ashwood High School — The Band Room

February 12 — 5:10 a.m.

The shelling started again at four o’clock and went on for an hour, and then, as the sky in the east began to turn from black to gray, it stopped.

Sarah Collins did not notice at first. She was bent over a teenage boy on the steel table — Marcus Webb, sixteen, one of Noah’s youth group riders, who had been carrying a message from the courthouse to the Route 13 line when a shell landed in the street behind him. His back was full of shrapnel. She had been picking it out with forceps, one piece at a time, for forty minutes.

It was Tess who noticed. Tess looked up from the instrument tray and said, very quietly, “Sarah. Listen.”

Sarah listened.

Nothing. No whistle. No crack. No shudder in the floor. Only the hiss of the lanterns, and the soft groans of the wounded along the walls, and the faint, far-off sound of a bell ringing somewhere across town — not the frantic alarm of the watchtowers, but slow and steady and deep.

The bell of First Baptist Church. Ringing for the dawn.

Sarah stood very still with the forceps in her hand.

Then she bent back over Marcus Webb and pulled out the last piece of shrapnel, and dropped it into the tin basin with a small clatter, and said, “That’s the last one. He’s going to be all right.”

Megan Torres burst into tears.

* * *

The Courthouse Square — Ashwood

February 12 — 6:45 a.m.

The sun came up on a town that had not fallen.

Ethan walked into the courthouse square in the gray light with his rifle slung and his face black with smoke and his legs so tired he could barely lift them, and stopped.

The square was covered in photographs.

A shell had landed in front of the south wall of the courthouse at 1:15 in the morning — close enough to shatter every window on that side of the building, close enough to gouge a crater six feet deep in the

frozen lawn where the bandstand had been. It had not hit the wall itself. But the blast had torn the Wall of the Missing apart.

Thousands of photographs lay scattered across the square. In the snow. On the sidewalks. Caught in the bare branches of the maple trees. Plastered against the sandbags of the inner ring barricades. Floating in the black water at the bottom of the crater. School pictures and wedding pictures and snapshots from birthday parties and fishing trips and church picnics. Ultrasound images. Hospital photos of newborns in tiny knit caps.

They lay everywhere, as far as he could see, faces turned up toward the gray morning sky.

And people were picking them up.

They had come out of the shelters at first light — out of the church basements and the old bank vault and the band room — and they had come to the square, and seen, and knelt down in the snow. Old men and young mothers and teenagers and refugees from Mansfield and Ontario. They moved slowly across the square in the cold, bending, picking up photographs one by one, brushing off the snow, looking at each face. Sometimes someone would find their own, and sit down suddenly in the snow with a photograph pressed against their chest, and weep. Mostly they simply gathered them up, whoever they were, and carried them in careful stacks to the courthouse steps, where Rebecca Whitfield was sitting with a cardboard box, laying each one inside, face up, as gently as if she were tucking a child into bed.

Ethan stood at the edge of the square and watched them for a long time.

Then he walked out into the snow and began to pick them up too.

He did not look for his own. He told himself he wasn't looking. He picked up a photograph of an old man in a fishing hat, holding up a bass. A photograph of two little boys in matching Easter suits. A wedding photograph, the bride laughing, the groom looking at her instead of the camera. He brushed the snow off each one and carried them to the steps and handed them to Rebecca.

On his fourth trip, near the edge of the crater, he saw a scrap of pink in the snow.

He knelt down.

It was a photograph of a little girl in a pink rain slicker, four years old, grinning, holding up a tadpole in a jelly jar like it was the greatest treasure in the world. One corner was torn. The edges were damp. But her face was perfect.

Ethan knelt in the snow at the edge of the crater and held it in both hands.

He did not cry. He had thought he would, if he ever found it like this. He did not.

He only looked at her for a long time, in the gray light. And he thought: *She's not here. She was never here. She's with Emily, and they're safe, and they're with Him.* And he thought: *Whatever happens tonight, whatever happens tomorrow — they're safe.*

And for the first time since 3:17 on an April afternoon, the thought did not break his heart.

It held it together.

He stood up, and brushed the snow off the photograph, and carried it to the courthouse steps, and handed it to Rebecca.

She looked down at it. Then up at him. Her eyes filled.

“Oh, Ethan,” she whispered.

“Put her with the others,” he said quietly. “She’d like that. She always liked company.”

Rebecca laid the photograph in the box, face up, on top of all the others.

* * *

The Courthouse Command Center

February 12 — 8:00 a.m.

They gave the numbers at eight o’clock, the way they always did.

Hal Whitaker read them in the ruined commissioners’ chamber, where the south windows were boarded now with plywood and the plaster dust still lay thick on the walnut table.

“Nine dead,” he said. “Reggie Coleman, at the Route Thirteen roadblock. Four volunteers on the south line. Two on the west. One of the fire brigade at the elevator. And one woman in her house on Sycamore Street, who wouldn’t go to the shelter.” He swallowed. “Thirty-one wounded. Dr. Collins says six of them are serious. Marcus Webb’s going to be all right.”

He turned the page.

“The grain elevator’s half burned. We saved about four thousand bushels. The high school gym roof is gone over the stage. The courthouse took one hit on the south side — windows, mostly, some of the roof. Sixteen houses damaged. Four burned.” He paused. “The Wall’s gone. People are collecting the pictures.”

“And Kane?” Brooks asked.

“Three ground attacks,” Jack said. He was standing at the county map with his arms folded, and he looked as though he had aged ten years in a single night. “Route Thirteen, County Road Twelve, and Township Fourteen. We held all three. South, we fought them off at the buses. West, they hit the old positions Keller gave them and walked into Luis’s new line. East —” He almost smiled. “East, they found the gap closed and ran without firing a shot.”

“How many of theirs?”

“Hard to say. They took most of their wounded with them. We counted thirty-four dead on the south and west lines.” Jack was quiet for a moment. “Tolliver fired about seventy rounds. By Cody Boone’s count, that’s almost half of what they had.”

“So they’re hurting too,” Mercer said.

“They’re hurting too.” Jack turned from the map. “But they’ve still got nine hundred men, or close to it. And they’ve still got ninety rounds for those guns. And they know now that we moved things. They

know the list is wrong.” He looked around the table. “Next time, they won’t be fighting Keller’s map. They’ll be fighting us.”

Nobody spoke.

Then, on the table, the shortwave radio crackled.

It was not the voice from Geneva. It was not the Office. It was a local frequency, one Mercer had been monitoring for weeks — the channel Kane’s commanders used to talk to each other. It had been silent all night.

Now a voice came through it. Calm. Measured. Cold.

“*Walker. I know you’re listening. You’ve been listening to my people for weeks.*”

The room went absolutely still.

“*You did well last night. Better than I expected. You moved your bunkers. You closed the gap. You held your roadblocks. My compliments to Reynolds. He’s a better soldier than I gave him credit for.*”

A pause. The hiss of static.

“*But it doesn’t matter. You know that. You lost nine people last night. You’ll lose more tonight. Your grain elevator is burning. Your farms are ash. Your food runs out in two weeks. And I still have nine hundred men.*”

“*So I’m going to give you one more chance. Not for you. For them. For the people in your church basements. For the children.*”

“*Surrender the town by noon. Send Walker, Reynolds, Brooks, and the Whitfield woman to the Grange Hall under a white flag. Every other soul in Ashwood will be spared. Registered. Fed. Protected. You have my word.*”

“*Refuse, and tonight I come in. All of us. From every direction at once. And I will not stop until Ashwood is mine.*”

“*You have until noon, Walker.*”

“*Kane out.*”

The radio hissed, and went silent.

For a long moment, nobody in the commissioners’ chamber moved.

Then Rebecca Whitfield, sitting at the end of the table with her father’s Bible and a cardboard box full of photographs in her lap, spoke very quietly.

“He wants me,” she said. “By name.”

“He’s not getting you,” Ethan said.

“He’s not getting any of us,” Jack said.

Daniel Brooks took off his glasses. He looked around the table — at Ethan, at Jack, at Rebecca, at Mercer and Hal and Rachel and Samuel. At the plywood over the shattered windows. At the plaster dust on the walnut table.

Then he put his glasses back on.

“I’ve been mayor of this town for eleven years,” he said. “I sold cars for thirty. I’ve never been a brave man. Everybody in this room knows that.” He took a breath. “But I watched Samuel Graves swing a maul at a padlock with fifty people burning behind it. I watched Reggie Coleman walk out across the snow at the buses. I watched a sixteen-year-old girl with a .22 hold the south line all night long.” His voice was very quiet. “And I heard three hundred people in a church basement sing *Jesus Loves Me* while the ceiling shook.”

He looked at the silent radio.

“We are not sending anybody to the Grange Hall,” he said. “Not today. Not ever.”

He picked up the microphone of the shortwave radio. He held it for a moment. Then he keyed it.

“Kane,” said Mayor Daniel Brooks of Ashwood, Ohio. “This is Brooks. You have our answer. It’s the same one Ethan nailed to the county line.” He paused. “‘*As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.*’”

He let go of the button.

And set the microphone down on the walnut table, very gently, as though it might break.

“*The LORD is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower.*”

— Psalm 18:2

* * *

END OF CHAPTER 15

CHAPTER 16

Blood in the Streets

“*Be not afraid of them: remember the Lord, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons, and your daughters, your wives, and your houses.*”

— Nehemiah 4:14

* * *

Ashwood High School — The Band Room

February 12 — 5:50 p.m.

Sarah found him at the door of the band room, just after sundown, as he was leaving.

She had not meant to. She had been carrying a basin of bloody water toward the back door to dump it in the snow, and he had been coming down the hall from the gymnasium with his rifle slung and a bandolier of ammunition across his chest, and they had simply met there, in the narrow corridor between the band room and the instrument lockers, in the flickering light of a single lantern.

They both stopped.

For a moment, neither of them said anything.

“You should be in the courthouse,” Sarah said finally. “Jack’s looking for you.”

“I know. I’m going.” Ethan looked at the basin in her hands. “How many?”

“Thirty-one from last night. Six still critical. Marcus Webb’s awake. He asked for Noah.” She set the basin down on the floor. Her hands were raw from scrubbing. “We’ve got about forty units of antibiotics left from Carl’s crate, and twelve bags of saline, and two vials of morphine. Tess thinks we can handle maybe fifty more wounded tonight before we’re just — sitting with them.” She swallowed. “Warren says that’s optimistic.”

“It’s going to be worse than last night,” Ethan said quietly.

“I know.”

The lantern hissed between them.

“Sarah —” he began.

“Don’t.” She looked up at him. Her eyes were very bright. “Don’t say anything that sounds like goodbye. I’ve heard enough goodbyes this week. I’ve held too many hands.” Her voice cracked. “Just — come back. That’s all. Come back to this band room tonight, and let me yell at you for not being careful.”

Ethan looked at her for a long moment in the lantern light. Her face was gray with exhaustion. There was dried blood on her cheek. Her hair had come loose from its tie and hung in her eyes.

He thought he had never seen anyone so beautiful in his life.

He did not say it. He did not know if he had the right. He had loved Emily for eleven years, and he still did, and he always would, and he did not know what to do with what he was feeling now, standing in a school hallway with a war outside.

So instead he reached out and took her hand — the raw, scrubbed, bleeding hand — and held it.

“I’ll come back,” he said.

She held on. For a long moment, she did not let go.

“‘*The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in,*’” she whispered, “‘*from this time forth, and even for evermore.*’”

“Psalm one twenty-one,” Ethan said.

“Emily underlined it. In the Bible you read to me when I was sick.” Sarah almost smiled. “You didn’t notice. You were too busy reading Second Corinthians.”

She let go of his hand.

“Go,” she said. “Before I change my mind and lock you in the instrument closet.”

He went.

* * *

The Courthouse Square

February 12 — 8:04 p.m.

The shelling began at eight, and it was different from the night before.

The night before, Tolliver had fired slowly — one round every few minutes, walking them in, adjusting, searching for his targets. Tonight, he fired everything.

The shells came in pairs and threes, faster than Ethan could count, whistling and cracking and shaking the earth. They fell on the middle ring. On the south roadblock at Route 13. On the west roadblock at County Road 12. On the bunkers and the trenches and the watchtowers. They were not aimed at the town. They were aimed at the line.

“He’s clearing a path,” Jack said.

He was crouched behind the sandbags at the top of the courthouse steps, with a radio in each hand, watching the south horizon light up with flash after flash. His face was set like stone.

“He’s putting everything on the roadblocks. Every round he’s got left. Tear them apart. Bury the bunkers. Knock down the towers.” He keyed the radio. “*All middle-ring positions, pull back to the secondary trenches. Get out of the bunkers. Now. They’re targeted. Get out and get back.*”

“How long?” Ethan asked.

“Till he runs out.” Jack watched another salvo land on Route 13. “Ninety rounds. Maybe an hour at this rate. Then they come.”

At 9:10, the shelling stopped.

At 9:14, the south roadblock fell.

* * *

Route 13 — South Middle Ring

February 12 — 9:14 p.m.

The hedgehogs were gone.

Tolliver’s shells had done what the armored truck could not. They had landed on the rows of welded railroad rails across the highway, one after another, until the rails were bent and twisted and scattered across the asphalt like broken toys. The two school buses were burning. The big bunker behind them —

the one where Reggie had stood the night before — was a crater full of splintered railroad ties and torn sandbags.

And through the gap, out of the dark, came Marcus Kane's army.

Not a probe this time. Not a hundred and fifty men testing the line. Everything. Two armored trucks, side by side, with their machine guns firing. Behind them, a wall of men — three hundred, maybe four — coming up Route 13 and across the fields on both sides at a run, shouting, firing as they came.

Luis Ortega's secondary trench line, dug two hundred yards behind the old roadblock, opened fire on them.

It was not enough. It could not have been enough. Forty rifles against four hundred.

At 9:31, Ortega keyed his radio.

"*Ortega to Reynolds. South line is breaking. I say again, south line is breaking. They're past the trenches. They're into the houses on the south end.*" A pause. The rattle of gunfire. "*Falling back to the inner ring. Main and Fourth. We'll hold them there as long as we can.*"

* * *

Main Street — The Inner Ring

February 12 — 10:15 p.m.

The war came into Ashwood house by house.

Ethan would remember it afterward not as a battle, but as a series of rooms. Kitchens. Living rooms. Front porches. Back yards with swing sets and frozen gardens. Places where people had eaten Thanksgiving dinners and opened Christmas presents and brought babies home from the hospital. He had been inside half of them over the years — as a cop, as a neighbor, as a guest.

Now he was fighting through them in the dark.

Kane's men came up the south end of town street by street — Poplar, Locust, Walnut, Sycamore — pushing north toward the courthouse square. Jack's volunteers fell back ahead of them, house by house, block by block, fighting from windows and porches and behind cars and woodpiles and garden walls. They knew these streets. They had grown up on them. They knew which alleys cut through and which yards had fences and which basements connected to which. Kane's men did not.

It was the only advantage Ashwood had. It was not enough to stop them. But it was enough to make them pay for every yard.

At 10:15, Ethan found himself on Sycamore Street.

He did not realize where he was at first. He was leading a squad of eight — farmers and mechanics, a schoolteacher, Kyle Voss — falling back up the street under fire, dodging from porch to porch. They ducked behind a hedge. A bullet snapped through the branches above his head. He looked up, gasping, at the house beside him.

A small white house with a sagging front porch. Rose bushes along the fence. A wind chime on the back porch, tinkling faintly in the smoke-filled wind.

His house.

For a moment, he could not move.

“Commander!” Kyle Voss grabbed his arm. “Commander, they’re coming! We have to move!”

Ethan looked down the street. Dark figures were moving between the houses, two blocks south, coming fast. He could see muzzle flashes.

He made a decision he could never afterward explain.

“Inside,” he said. “Everybody. Into the house. We hold here.”

“*Here?*”

“The porch has a stone foundation. The front windows look straight down the street. The back door opens onto the alley. We can hold them here for ten minutes, and then go out the back.” He was already moving, up the front steps, pushing open the door he had locked every night for eleven years. “*Go!*”

They went.

* * *

Ethan had not let anyone into this house since April.

Now eight armed men crowded into the small front room in the dark, knocking over a lamp, shoving the couch against the front window, kneeling behind it with their rifles. Someone broke the glass out of the window with a rifle butt. Cold air poured in, and smoke, and the sound of gunfire.

Ethan went through to the kitchen, to check the back door.

He stopped in the doorway.

In the faint orange light of the fires burning down the street, coming through the kitchen window, he could see it all. Emily’s reading glasses on the windowsill above the sink. Her Bible on the counter by the coffee maker. The *World’s Okayest Gardener* mug on its hook.

And on the refrigerator, held up by a ladybug magnet, the crayon drawing.

Four figures in front of a lopsided yellow house. *DADDY. MOMMY. ME.* And behind them, taller than all the rest, in bright gold crayon with rays of light coming out of him in every direction, a figure with his arms spread wide over all of them.

JESUS KEEPS US SAFE.

A bullet came through the kitchen window and smashed into the cabinet above the sink. Glass sprayed across the counter. Emily’s reading glasses fell off the windowsill and clattered into the sink.

Ethan did not flinch.

He walked across the kitchen, through the broken glass, and took the crayon drawing off the refrigerator. He folded it carefully, twice, and put it in the inside pocket of his coat, next to Emily's green New Testament and the photograph of his daughter in the pink rain slicker.

Then he picked up Emily's Bible from the counter and put that in his coat too.

"*Commander!*" Kyle's voice from the front room. "*They're here!*"

Ethan went back to the front window.

They held the house for eleven minutes. Ethan would never remember most of them. He would remember the couch jumping as bullets struck it. The front door splintering. A man in camouflage coming up the porch steps and Ethan firing and the man falling back down them. Kyle Voss beside him, firing and reloading and firing, with his jaw clenched and tears running down his face.

He would remember the schoolteacher — a quiet, gentle man named Harold Finch who had taught seventh-grade social studies for thirty years — being hit in the shoulder and falling back against the wall, and saying, very calmly, *Oh, dear,* as if he had spilled his coffee.

And he would remember, at the end of eleven minutes, looking out the shattered window and seeing a flicker of orange at the house next door — the Pattersons' house, where he had shoveled the walk for old Mrs. Patterson every winter for ten years — and realizing that Kane's men had set it on fire, and that the fire was going to jump the gap between the houses, and that his house was going to burn.

"Out the back!" he shouted. "Everybody out the back! Now! Carry Harold!"

They went out the back door into the alley, running, carrying the wounded schoolteacher between them, and did not look back.

Ethan looked back.

Just once, from the end of the alley. He saw the flames climbing up the side of the house on Sycamore Street — the house Emily had picked out when they were newlyweds with no money and big dreams, the house she had painted every room of herself. He saw the fire reach the back porch. He heard, very faintly, over the roar and the gunfire, the wind chime ringing.

Then he turned and ran.

In his coat, against his heart, he carried everything that mattered.

* * *

The Grain Elevator

February 12 — 11:40 p.m.

Luis Ortega had climbed to the top of the grain elevator at eleven o'clock, with his father-in-law's Remington and forty rounds of ammunition and Hannah Voss.

It had not been Jack's idea. Jack had ordered him to the courthouse square, to hold the south barricade at Main and Third. Ortega had listened, and nodded, and then turned to Hannah and said, very quietly,

The elevator. It's the highest point on the south side. From the top of the headhouse, you can see every street from Poplar to Main.

The headhouse had been half burned the night before. Its steel walls were blackened and twisted. There was a jagged hole in the south side where Tolliver's second shell had come through. But the top platform still stood, a hundred and twenty feet above the street, with a steel railing around it and a view of the whole south end of town.

From up there, Luis Ortega could see everything.

He could see Kane's men moving through the streets below — dark figures running between the houses, clustering at corners, dragging machine guns up onto porches. He could see the fires burning on Sycamore Street and Walnut and Locust. He could see the Ashwood volunteers falling back ahead of them, house by house, toward the courthouse square. He could see where the enemy was about to cut them off. Where they were massing. Where their officers were standing and pointing and shouting orders.

And he could shoot them.

He lay on the steel platform at the top of the grain elevator with Hannah beside him, and worked the bolt of his father-in-law's old Remington, and fired. Slowly. Carefully. Breathing in, breathing out, halfway, holding.

Every time he fired, somewhere in the streets below, an attack faltered.

A machine-gun crew setting up on the porch of the old Ashwood Savings & Loan — the building that held the town's last medicine — stopped, and scattered. An officer waving his men forward down Locust Street fell, and his men hesitated, and went to ground. A squad trying to flank the Main and Third barricade through the alley behind the Rialto found themselves pinned against a brick wall by a single rifle they could not see.

"Who is that?" Hannah whispered, the second or third time. "The man by the truck. With the radio."

Ortega looked through the scope. A tall man, bareheaded, standing behind one of the armored trucks at the corner of Main and Fifth, with a radio in his hand, pointing north toward the courthouse.

"Their commander on this side," he said. "I think."

"Are you going to —"

Ortega was already breathing in. Breathing out. Halfway.

He held.

He fired.

The tall man by the truck spun and fell.

And down on Main Street, three hundred yards away, the whole southern push toward the courthouse square — the push that had been rolling forward for two hours, block by block — stopped. Just for a moment. Just long enough for Jack Reynolds, at the Main and Third barricade, to see it.

"*Now!*" Jack roared. "*Now! Counterattack! Push them back! PUSH!*"

And the Ashwood volunteers came up out of the barricade and drove south down Main Street with a sound Ethan had never heard human beings make before — a roar that was half fury and half grief and half prayer — and Kane's men, leaderless, confused, under fire from a rifle they could not find, fell back.

Two blocks. Three.

On top of the grain elevator, Luis Ortega worked the bolt of his rifle and looked for the next target.

He did not see the muzzle flash from the roof of the Corner Diner, across the street.

Hannah did.

"*Luis —*"

* * *

She dragged him back from the edge of the platform. She did not know how. He was twice her size. She pulled him by the collar of his coat into the shelter of the blackened steel wall of the headhouse, and pressed both hands against his chest, where the blood was coming, and screamed into the radio for help.

Ortega looked up at her. His face was very calm.

"Hannah," he said.

"Don't talk. Don't — they're coming, they're coming, Jack's sending somebody —"

"Hannah." He reached up with one hand and touched her face. His fingers were cold. "You did good. You did so good."

"*Please*," she sobbed. "*Please, please, please —*"

"My grandmother," Ortega said softly. "In Toledo. She used to say a prayer. Every night. When I was little." His voice was growing faint. "*El Señor es mi pastor… nada me faltará.*"

"The Lord is my shepherd," Hannah whispered. "I shall not want."

Luis Ortega smiled.

"*Sí,*" he said.

And he closed his eyes.

Hannah Voss, sixteen years old, knelt on the steel platform at the top of the burning grain elevator with her hands pressed against the chest of the man who had taught her to shoot, and held him while he died. Below her, in the streets, the counterattack rolled south down Main Street — the counterattack he had made possible with a single shot — and she did not see it. She did not hear it.

She only heard the silence where his breathing had been.

Then she picked up his father-in-law's Remington, and wiped the blood off the stock with her sleeve, and settled it against her shoulder, and looked through the scope for the man on the roof of the Corner Diner.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Halfway. Hold.

* * *

The Co-op Annex — Behind the Elevator

February 13 — 12:50 a.m.

Hal Whitaker had one job, and he had given it to himself.

The seed corn.

Nine hundred bushels of it, in the concrete cellar under the old co-op annex behind the grain elevator. The grain Russ Keller had hidden and then given back. The grain that was next summer's harvest — two hundred acres, maybe more. The only seed left in the county after Kane burned every crib on every farm.

If it burned, Ashwood would starve in July even if it survived tonight.

So Hal Whitaker, sixty-eight years old, with a bad knee and a deer rifle older than most of the men he was fighting, sat on the concrete steps of the co-op annex with six volunteers — three farmers, two refugees from Ontario, and Gary Voss — and guarded it.

Kane's men found them at ten minutes to one.

Twenty of them. Maybe more. Pushed back up Main Street by Jack's counterattack, looking for a way around the barricades, they came through the rail yard behind the elevator and saw the annex, and the men on its steps, and opened fire.

Hal and his six held for twenty minutes.

Twenty minutes, in the dark, in the rail yard, behind a low concrete wall and a stack of old pallets, against three times their number. Gary Voss was hit in the leg in the first five minutes and kept firing from where he lay. One of the refugees from Ontario was killed. One of the farmers.

And then a man in camouflage came around the end of the concrete wall with a gasoline can in one hand and a road flare in the other, heading for the annex door.

Hal Whitaker stood up.

He did not say anything. He did not shout. He simply stood up from behind the pallets, in full view of every rifle in the rail yard, and shot the man with the gasoline can.

Then he was hit.

He sat down again, slowly, against the concrete wall. Gary Voss dragged himself across the frozen gravel to him on his elbows, trailing blood.

"Hal. *Hal.* Hold on. They're coming. I can hear Jack's boys coming."

He could. Down the rail yard, from the direction of Main Street, came the sound of running feet and shouting and a sudden storm of rifle fire as Jack's counterattack swept around the end of the elevator and hit Kane's men from behind.

Hal Whitaker looked at the door of the annex. It was closed. It was not burning.

"The seed," he said. His voice was a whisper.

"It's safe, Hal. It's safe. Nobody touched it."

"Good." Hal closed his eyes. "Good." He was quiet for a moment. Then, so faintly that Gary had to lean close to hear: "'*While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest… shall not cease.*'" A breath. "*Genesis… eight.*" Another breath. "*Tell 'em… plant it… in April.*"

"You tell 'em yourself, Hal," Gary said. "You're going to plant it yourself."

But Hal Whitaker, who had farmed the same ground for fifty years and had never once looked out at a field and thought *people are going to starve* until this winter, was already gone.

* * *

The Hollow — Outside the South Barricade

February 13 — 1:30 a.m.

Dale Kirby could see the fires from the lip of the gravel pit.

Ashwood was burning. The whole south end of town. He could see the flames on the streets below the grain elevator, and the smoke rising orange into the black sky, and he could hear the gunfire — continuous now, rising and falling, like surf on a rocky shore.

Behind him, in the bowl of the Hollow, fifteen hundred people were awake. Standing in the dark. Watching.

Nobody had told them to come. Nobody had told them to stay. Kane's army had marched right past the gravel pit on Route 13 at nine o'clock that night, four hundred men and two armored trucks, and had not even looked at them. Why would they? The Hollow was nothing. A camp full of starving refugees from Mansfield, living in holes in the gravel and eating soup from Ashwood's gate.

Dale Kirby had watched them go by. And he had thought about his wife, who had burned alive in their house on Diamond Street. And his son, Eli, six years old. And a skinny eighteen-year-old boy with stitches in his face, kneeling in the gravel with his arms around a stranger who had just hit him with a rock.

God can take a pit and a prison and a burning city, and turn it into a way to save people alive.

He turned around and looked at the crowd.

"They fed us," he said.

His voice was not loud. But it carried across the frozen bowl of the Hollow, and fifteen hundred faces turned toward him.

“Every morning,” Dale Kirby said. “That boy. Noah. Every single morning, for a month. Bread. They didn’t have enough for themselves. And they brought it out here to us. Strangers. People who stole from their farms.” He swallowed. “And when I threw a rock at him, he came down off the wagon and held me while I cried.”

The Hollow was silent.

“They’re dying in there,” Dale said. “Right now. That town that fed us. That boy. Those church ladies. That doctor who came out here and treated our kids.” He pointed down Route 13, toward the burning town. “And Kane’s army just walked right past us. Four hundred of them. With their backs to us.”

He bent down and picked up a pitchfork that was leaning against the side of a rusted dump truck.

“I’m going,” he said. “I don’t know what I’m going to do when I get there. But I’m not going to stand in this pit and watch them burn.”

For a long moment, nobody moved.

Then a woman stepped forward out of the crowd. The same woman who had screamed at Noah on the first day — *Where was Jesus when my kids burned?* — and had knelt in the gravel three weeks later and given her life to Him. She had a shovel.

Then a man with a deer rifle. Then two teenage boys with baseball bats. Then an old man with a tire iron. Then more. And more. And more.

* * *

They hit Kane’s rear on Route 13 at 1:55 in the morning.

It was not an army. It was not even a militia. It was eight hundred starving refugees from Mansfield — men and women, old and young — with pitchforks and shovels and hunting rifles and baseball bats and whatever else they could find in a gravel pit, coming out of the dark behind Kane’s reserves at a dead run, screaming.

Kane’s reserves — sixty men guarding the supply trucks and the ammunition and the wounded on Route 13, a quarter mile south of the broken roadblock — never saw them coming. They were watching the fires. They were watching the town.

They turned around to see eight hundred people pouring down the highway toward them out of the darkness.

And they broke.

They did not fight. They did not even fire. They dropped their rifles and ran — east and west across the frozen fields, south down Route 13, anywhere but toward that screaming, stumbling, unstoppable wall of people. They left the supply trucks. They left the ammunition. They left the wounded. They left everything.

And the panic went up Route 13 ahead of them like a fire through dry grass.

* * *

The Methodist Church — Walnut Street

February 13 — 2:10 a.m.

Evan Lowe had been in Ashwood for five hours.

He had come up Route 13 with the first wave at 9:14, through the broken roadblock, past the burning school buses. He had fought through the streets on the south end of town — or rather, he had walked through them with his rifle, and fired it when he was ordered to, and aimed high every single time. He had watched men from his squad go into houses. He had watched houses burn. He had watched Sergeant Hendricks shoot an old man on a front porch who came out waving a cane.

He had not stopped shaking for five hours.

Now, at ten minutes past two in the morning, his squad was crouched behind a burning car at the corner of Walnut and Fourth, across the street from a big stone church with a square bell tower. Hendricks was on the radio. The rest of the squad — thirty men, most of them conscripts from Harlan's Crossing like Evan — were huddled against the car, gasping, reloading, staring at the church.

"*Church basement,*" Hendricks said, lowering the radio. "The Colonel says it's full of civilians. Families. He wants it cleared. Everybody out. Anybody who resists —" He shrugged. "Burn it if you have to."

Nobody moved.

"You heard me," Hendricks said. "*Move.*"

And then Evan heard it.

Faint. Coming up from the stone church through the basement windows, which were only a foot above the snow at the base of the wall. Muffled by the stone and the smoke and the gunfire. But perfectly clear, in the space between one volley and the next.

Children singing.

"*Jesus loves me, this I know, For the Bible tells me so…*"

Thin. Wavering. Off-key. Dozens of small voices.

"*Little ones to Him belong; They are weak, but He is strong.*"

Evan Lowe stood up behind the burning car.

He did not decide to. He simply found himself standing, with his rifle in his hands, looking at the stone church and listening to the children sing. He thought of his little sisters in Harlan's Crossing. He thought of Kaylee Dorsey crying in the lunch line at the union hall school. He thought of the old man at the bottom of the quarry, singing *Amazing Grace* in the dark, and the last words he had whispered through the steel door: *There is no peace… but His.*

He thought of sixty cows running out into the dark.

"No," he said.

Hendricks turned. “*What?*”

“No,” Evan said again. His voice was shaking, but it was loud enough for the whole squad to hear. “I’m not going in there. There’s kids in there, Sergeant. You can hear them. They’re *singing.*”

“*Get down, Lowe!*”

“No.” Evan turned to the other men crouched behind the car — the boys from Harlan’s Crossing, the conscripts, the ones who had taken the oath because their mothers needed rations. He knew most of their names. He had grown up with some of them. “I’m done. I’m not burning a church full of kids for Marcus Kane. I don’t care what he does to me.” He looked at them. “My mom’s in Harlan’s Crossing. So’s yours, Tanner. And yours, Mike. You want to go home and tell them you burned kids alive tonight?”

Nobody answered.

Hendricks raised his rifle and pointed it at Evan’s chest.

“*Down,*” he said. “*Or I put you down.*”

For a long moment, nobody moved.

Then a boy named Tanner Gibbs — nineteen years old, from the farm next to Evan’s on the Harlan’s Crossing road — stood up behind the burning car, and raised his own rifle, and pointed it at Hendricks.

“No, Sergeant,” Tanner said quietly. “You won’t.”

Then another boy stood up. And another. And another.

Hendricks looked around at them — twenty rifles now, pointed at him, twenty scared, shaking, furious boys from Harlan’s Crossing — and slowly, very slowly, lowered his own.

Evan Lowe laid his rifle down in the snow.

Then he walked across Walnut Street, alone, with his hands raised, through the smoke and the firelight, to the stone steps of the First Methodist Church. And he knelt down on the steps, and bowed his head, and waited.

In the basement below him, the children went on singing.

* * *

The Courthouse Square

February 13 — 3:20 a.m.

Marcus Kane came into the courthouse square on foot.

Ethan saw him from behind the sandbags of the inner ring barricade at the corner of Main and Church, and knew him at once, though they had never met. He had seen him through binoculars at the county line. He had heard his voice on the radio. He would have known him anywhere.

A tall, lean man in a dark wool coat, bareheaded, with a rifle in his hands, walking into the square from the south with Dutch Kessler at his side and a dozen men behind him. He did not run. He did not crouch. He walked as though the square already belonged to him.

The square was a ruin. The crater where the bandstand had been. The shattered windows of the courthouse. The flagpole, bent by a shell fragment, with the tattered stars and stripes hanging from it at an angle. The sandbags of the inner ring barricades, torn and scattered. Smoke everywhere, orange with firelight.

And on the courthouse steps, the cardboard box that Rebecca had filled with photographs from the Wall of the Missing, sitting where she had left it the morning before, when the shelling started.

Kane stopped in the middle of the square and looked around.

He had been fighting for six hours. He had broken the middle ring. He had pushed Ashwood's defenders back through half the town. He had burned four streets. He should have been winning.

But Ethan could see his face in the firelight. And it was not the face of a man who was winning.

Behind him, to the south, something was happening. Ethan could hear it — a rising roar of shouting and gunfire on Route 13, far beyond the broken roadblock, where no fighting should have been. He could see Kane's men in the streets south of the square looking back over their shoulders, hesitating, turning. On his radio, Jack's voice, hoarse and disbelieving: "*— the Hollow — it's the people from the Hollow — they hit his rear — his reserves are running —*" And another voice, from the Walnut Street barricade: "*— squad of Kane's conscripts just laid down their weapons at the Methodist church — thirty of them — they're surrendering —*"

Kane was losing his army.

And he knew it.

Ethan stood up behind the sandbags.

He did not know why. Afterward, he would never be able to explain it — not to Jack, not to Sarah, not to himself. He simply stood up, with his rifle in his hands, and stepped out from behind the barricade into the open square, into the firelight, fifty feet from Marcus Kane.

Kane saw him.

For a long moment, the two men looked at each other across the ruined square. Behind Kane, Kessler raised his rifle. Behind Ethan, at the barricade, a dozen Ashwood rifles rose to cover him.

Nobody fired.

"Walker," Kane said.

"Kane."

"You came out." Kane's voice was very calm. "I didn't think you'd come out."

"Neither did I."

Kane looked around the square. At the crater. At the bent flagpole. At the cardboard box on the courthouse steps. At the smoke rising orange into the sky.

“I’ve taken half your town,” he said. “Your elevator’s burning. Your farms are ash. You’ve lost —” he paused — “I don’t know how many. A lot.”

“So have you.”

“So have I.” Kane was silent for a moment. “My reserves are running. My conscripts are surrendering. Some half-starved rabble from a gravel pit just hit my supply column with pitchforks.” Something that was almost a laugh crossed his face. “Pitchforks, Walker. I had two howitzers and nine hundred men and a charter from the most powerful office on earth. And I’m losing to *pitchforks.*”

Ethan said nothing.

“Why?” Kane said.

The question was very quiet.

“Why won’t you bow?” Kane said. “Any of you. The old Mennonite. Haskins. That preacher’s daughter. You.” He shook his head slowly. “I offered you everything. Food. Medicine. Safety. Your lives. And you’d rather burn.” His voice cracked, just slightly, for the first time. “*Why?*”

Ethan looked at him for a long time.

He thought of the crayon drawing in his coat pocket. *JESUS KEEPS US SAFE.* He thought of Emily’s Bible. He thought of a woman named Diane, standing in a kitchen on Birch Street in Iron Ridge on an April afternoon, making a tuna casserole.

“Because your wife was right,” he said quietly.

Marcus Kane went absolutely still.

“She was right about everything,” Ethan said. “Just like mine was. They told us. For years. And we didn’t listen. And then they were gone, and we were left.” He took a step forward. “I know what you felt, Kane. I know exactly what you felt, when you came home and found her clothes on the floor. I felt it too. I stood in my kitchen holding Emily’s apron and I hated God so much I couldn’t breathe.”

Kane’s face was white in the firelight.

“You decided God didn’t want you,” Ethan said. “So you’d build your own kingdom. You’d protect your own. You’d make sure nobody ever took anything from you again.” He shook his head. “I understand that. I almost did the same thing.” He paused. “But she didn’t leave you behind because God didn’t want you, Kane. He left you behind because He *did.* Because He wasn’t finished with you. Because He’s still calling you home.” His voice dropped. “Your son knows that. Tyler’s been listening to the tapes. Every night. He prays for you.”

“*Don’t,*” Kane said hoarsely. “Don’t you talk about my son.”

“Word gets around, Kane. Even out of Iron Ridge. They say he’s got his mother’s Bible hidden in his room, and he’s been reading it to other kids in secret. They say he’s not afraid of you anymore. He’s

not afraid of anything.” He held Kane’s eyes. “That’s why we won’t bow. Because once you know Him — once you really know Him — there’s nothing left in the world that can make you afraid.”

For a long, long moment, Marcus Kane stood in the middle of the burning square and stared at him.

Ethan saw something move across his face. Grief. Rage. And something else, something deeper, something that looked — just for an instant — like a man standing at the edge of a door he had spent ten months trying to lock.

Then Kane’s jaw tightened. And his rifle came up.

And from the top of the grain elevator, three blocks away, a single rifle shot cracked across the square.

* * *

The bullet hit Marcus Kane high in the right shoulder and spun him halfway around.

His rifle flew out of his hands and clattered on the frozen pavement. He staggered, and went down on one knee, clutching his shoulder, and Dutch Kessler was beside him in an instant, dragging him up, shouting.

Ethan did not move. He stood in the middle of the square with his rifle in his hands, and he did not fire. He could have. Kane was twenty yards away, on his knees, helpless. Every man at the Ashwood barricade behind Ethan had him in his sights.

Ethan lowered his rifle.

“*Hold your fire!*” he shouted over his shoulder. “*Hold your fire! Let them go!*”

Kessler looked at him — a long, disbelieving stare across the smoke. Then he threw Kane’s good arm over his own shoulder and hauled him to his feet, and the two of them stumbled backward out of the square, south, toward Main Street, with the dozen men behind them covering their retreat.

At the edge of the square, Kane looked back.

Just once. Over Kessler’s shoulder, with his face gray with pain and blood running down his arm.

He looked at Ethan standing alone in the middle of the ruined square with his rifle lowered.

Then he was gone.

* * *

On top of the grain elevator, Hannah Voss lowered Luis Ortega’s father-in-law’s Remington and let out a long, shaking breath.

She had not aimed to kill. She would tell Jack that later, when he asked, and he would believe her. She had watched through the scope as the man in the dark coat raised his rifle toward Commander Walker, and she had thought of Luis, and of what Luis would have done — and she had breathed in, and breathed out, and aimed for his shoulder.

Slow is smooth. Smooth is fast.

She set the rifle down on the steel platform beside Luis's body, and put her hand on his cold chest, and bowed her head.

* * *

The Courthouse Square

February 13 — 6:40 a.m.

The bells began ringing at dawn.

Not the frantic alarm of the watchtowers. Not three rings, or continuous ringing. Something different. The bell of First Baptist Church, first — slow and deep and steady. Then the bell of the First Methodist Church on Walnut Street. Then the Lutheran church. Then the Catholic church on Maple. Then the bells in the watchtowers of the middle ring, one after another, all the way around the town, until every bell in Ashwood was ringing together in the gray light, slow and steady, like a heartbeat.

Kane's army was gone.

It had begun to break at two in the morning, when the people of the Hollow hit its rear on Route 13. By three, when Evan Lowe laid down his rifle on the steps of the Methodist church and thirty boys from Harlan's Crossing followed him, the south end of Kane's line was falling apart. By four, after the word spread that the Colonel himself had been shot in the courthouse square, it had become a retreat. By five, a rout.

By six-thirty, the last of Marcus Kane's men had streamed south out of Ashwood through the broken roadblock on Route 13, past the burning school buses, past the supply trucks abandoned on the highway, past eight hundred refugees from the Hollow standing silent in the snow with their pitchforks and their shovels, and disappeared into the gray dawn toward Iron Ridge.

They left behind their dead. Their wounded. Their supply column. And a hundred and twelve prisoners — most of them conscripts from Harlan's Crossing and Brinkley and Galion, who had laid down their weapons and would not pick them up again.

Ethan Walker stood in the middle of the courthouse square and listened to the bells.

He was so tired he could barely stand. His coat was torn and black with smoke. There was blood on his hands that was not his own. In his inside pocket, against his heart, he could feel the folded crayon drawing and Emily's Bible and the photograph of his daughter.

The square was full of people.

They had come out of the shelters at the first sound of the bells — out of the church basements and the bank vault and the band room — and they were standing in the smoke and the snow, silent, looking at what was left of their town. The burned houses on the south side. The half-ruined grain elevator. The crater. The courthouse with its shattered windows.

And the flagpole.

The flag was still there. Bent at an angle on its broken pole, torn and blackened, its red stripes faded almost to pink, its bottom edge shredded into long fluttering threads. But still there.

As Ethan watched, Noah Simmons walked across the square to the flagpole.

He did not say anything. He simply untied the halyard from its cleat, and lowered the flag, carefully, hand over hand, and caught it before it touched the ground. And then, with the help of two boys from his youth group, he straightened the bent pole as best he could, and bent it back into something that was almost upright, and tied the flag back on, and raised it again.

It climbed slowly up the broken pole in the gray morning light, and reached the top, and hung there.

And then a gust of wind came across the square, out of the east, where the sun was rising, and the tattered flag of a nation that no longer existed stirred and lifted and flew.

Nobody cheered. Nobody said anything at all.

But across the square, one by one, people began to kneel.

Ethan felt a hand slip into his.

He did not have to look. He knew the hand. Raw and scrubbed and bleeding.

“You came back,” Sarah said quietly.

“I came back.”

“Jack’s in the band room,” she said. “He took a round in the side at the Main and Third barricade, just before dawn. He’s going to be all right. He’s furious. He keeps asking for you.” Her voice cracked. “Ethan — Luis is gone. And Hal. And Walt Kimble — they found him in his front yard on Chestnut Street, with Angela and the baby in the cellar behind him. He wouldn’t let them in.”

Ethan closed his eyes.

“I know,” he said. “I know.”

Sarah did not say anything else. She simply stood beside him in the smoke and the snow and held his hand, while the bells rang over Ashwood, and the flag flew, and the sun came up over the burned fields to the east.

Rebecca Whitfield came across the square toward them from the courthouse steps, carrying the cardboard box of photographs in her arms. Her face was streaked with soot and tears. She stopped in front of them and looked at Ethan for a long moment.

Then she set the box down on the frozen ground, opened her father’s Bible, and read aloud, in a voice that shook but carried across the silent square to every kneeling figure in the snow:

“*If it had not been the LORD who was on our side, now may Israel say; If it had not been the LORD who was on our side, when men rose up against us: Then they had swallowed us up quick, when their wrath was kindled against us… Blessed be the LORD, who hath not given us as a prey to their teeth. Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers: the snare is broken, and we are escaped. Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.*”

— Psalm 124

* * *

END OF CHAPTER 16

PART FIVE — HOPE AMONG THE RUINS

* * *

CHAPTER 17

Victory at a Cost

"*They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.*"

— Psalm 126:5–6

* * *

The Courthouse — Old County Recorder's Office

February 13 — 10:00 a.m.

Rachel Monroe wrote down the names.

Nobody asked her to. She simply did it. At eight o'clock on the morning after the battle, while the bells were still ringing and the smoke was still rising from the south end of town, she walked into the old county recorder's office on the ground floor of the courthouse — the room where she had carved the wooden passes, the room where for a hundred and fifty years the clerks of Ashwood County had recorded every birth and death and marriage in thick leather-bound books — and she took one of those books down from the shelf.

It was a death register. *Ashwood County, Ohio. Record of Deaths. Volume XXXVII. 2019–.* The last entry was dated April of the year before. A man named Harold Dunbar, eighty-eight, of heart failure. After that, nothing. The clerks had vanished or fled, and no one had written anything in the book since.

Rachel opened it to the first blank page, and uncapped her pen, and began.

She wrote every name. She went to the clinic and the band room and the churches and the shelters, and to the south end of town where the houses were still smoldering, and to the rail yard behind the grain elevator, and to Walnut Street and Sycamore and Chestnut, and she asked. Who was here? Who is missing? Who did you see fall? She wrote down every answer. She did not hurry. When people wept, she waited. When they wanted to tell her about the person — who they had been, what they had loved, how they had laughed — she listened, and wrote that down too, in the margin, in small careful letters.

By noon, the page was full. By three o'clock, the next one.

Luis Alejandro Ortega. 34. Line cook. Marksman. Killed at the grain elevator. Taught a sixteen-year-old girl to shoot, and held the south end of the town alone.

Harold Whitaker. 68. Farmer. Killed defending the seed corn. Farmed the same ground for fifty years. His last words were "plant it in April."

Walter Kimble. 79. Retired. Killed in his front yard on Chestnut Street. Would not let the men pass who were coming for Angela and the baby in his cellar. Coached Little League for thirty years. Hit a softball over the left-field fence at seventy.

Reginald Coleman. 58. Janitor, Mercy General Hospital. Killed at the Route 13 roadblock, February 11. Walked across the snow with a fire axe.

And on. And on.

When Ethan came in at four o'clock, she was on the fourth page.

He stood in the doorway and looked at her — sitting at the long oak counter with the leather-bound book open in front of her, and her pen moving steadily, and her face perfectly still.

"How many?" he asked quietly.

Rachel did not look up. She finished the name she was writing. Then she set down the pen.

"From Ashwood," she said, "sixty-four. Forty-one defenders. Twenty-three civilians." She turned back a page. "From the Hollow — twenty-six. They died on Route 13 when they hit Kane's rear. Most of them didn't even have guns." She paused. "A hundred and forty-three wounded. Sarah thinks at least eight more won't make it."

Ethan closed his eyes.

"And Kane's?"

"Jack's people are still counting. A hundred and fifty at least. Maybe more." She was quiet for a moment. "I'm going to write them down too. The ones we can identify. Evan Lowe says he knows most of the boys from Harlan's Crossing."

Ethan looked at her.

"Why?" he asked.

Rachel looked down at the book. At the careful columns of names.

"Because somebody made a list of all of us," she said. "Eleven weeks before the vanishing. Name, age, address, occupation, religion. So they could sort us. Manage us. Decide who was worth feeding." She laid her hand flat on the page. "This is a different kind of list. This one's so nobody's forgotten. So when Jesus comes back, and He asks what happened in Ashwood, Ohio, in the winter the world ended — somebody wrote it down." Her voice caught. "Every one of them. Even the enemy. Even the boys who came here to burn us. They had mothers too."

She picked up the pen again.

"'*Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints,*'" she said softly, and went back to writing.

Ethan stood in the doorway for a long time and watched her.

Then he came in, and pulled up a chair beside her at the counter, and began to help.

* * *

Ashwood High School — The Band Room

February 13 — 7:30 p.m.

Jack Reynolds had been shot through the left side, just below the ribs. The bullet had gone in and out without hitting anything that mattered — "a miracle," Sarah said, "or the dumbest luck I've ever seen" — and she had stitched both holes and packed them with Mennonite honey and ordered him flat on his back for a week.

He had been flat on his back for fourteen hours. He was already trying to get up.

"If you tear those stitches," Sarah said from across the band room, without looking up from the patient she was treating, "I will sedate you with the last of the ketamine, and I will enjoy it."

"I need to see the lines," Jack said. "The south roadblock. The west trenches. Kane's going to —"

"Kane's going to lie in his big brick house for a month with a bullet hole in his shoulder," Sarah said. "Mercer's seeing the lines. Lie *down.*"

Jack lay down.

Ethan pulled a folding chair up beside his cot and sat. For a long time neither of them said anything.

"Luis," Jack said finally.

"I know."

"I sent him to the Main and Third barricade. I *ordered* him." Jack stared up at the ceiling. His jaw was working. "And he went up that elevator anyway. Took the girl with him. Never even told me." He was silent for a moment. "If he'd gone where I sent him, he'd be alive."

"And we'd have lost the south end of town," Ethan said. "Maybe the whole town. You saw what happened when he took that commander down. The whole push stopped. That was your counterattack, Jack. That was him."

"I know." Jack's voice was rough. "I know it was. That's what makes it so —" He stopped. He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. "Twenty-two years in the Army. Three combat tours. I lost men. I carried men. I wrote letters to their mothers. I thought I knew what it felt like." He lowered his hands. "I didn't know anything. Luis Ortega was a *cook,* Ethan. He made hamburgers at the Applebee's on Route 42. His wife vanished in April. He came to the first militia meeting because he didn't know what else to do with himself. And I turned him into the best rifleman I've ever seen in my life, and he died on top of a grain elevator because of it."

Ethan did not say anything. There was nothing to say.

Across the band room, the door opened, and Hannah Voss came in.

She was carrying Luis Ortega's rifle — his father-in-law's old Remington, with its worn walnut stock. Someone had cleaned it. The blood was gone. She held it in both arms, against her chest, the way you might carry a sleeping child.

She walked across the band room to Jack's cot and stopped.

"I didn't know who to give it to," she said. Her voice was very small. "It was his father-in-law's. And his wife's gone, and her father's in — I don't know where he is. And I thought —" She swallowed. "I thought you should have it. You were his commander."

Jack looked at the rifle. Then at the girl holding it — sixteen years old, freckled, with dark circles under her eyes and a hollowness in her face that had not been there two days ago.

"You were with him," he said quietly. "At the end."

Hannah nodded.

"And you shot Kane. In the square. Walker says you aimed for the shoulder."

She nodded again. Her lips were trembling.

"I shot other people too," she whispered. "Before that. From the elevator. After Luis —" She stopped. "I don't know how many. I didn't count. I didn't want to count." Tears were running down her face now. "Mr. Reynolds, I'm sixteen. I was supposed to be taking my driver's test in March. I was going to try out for the softball team. And I lay on top of that elevator all night and —" She could not finish.

Jack pushed himself up on his elbow, wincing, ignoring Sarah's warning look from across the room. He reached out and took the rifle from Hannah's arms and laid it across his lap. Then he took her hand.

"Listen to me, Hannah," he said. "Are you listening?"

She nodded.

"What you did up there," he said, "you did for the people in that church basement. For the kids from Mansfield. For your little nephew. For your brother and your dad and everybody in this town. You didn't do it because you wanted to. You did it because somebody had to stand between them and the men who came to kill them." His voice was steady. "That's not murder. That's love. It's the hardest kind there is."

Hannah was crying too hard to answer.

"And it's going to hurt," Jack said. "For a long time. Maybe forever. I'm not going to lie to you about that." He squeezed her hand. "But you don't have to carry it by yourself. I carry mine. Walker carries his. And Somebody a lot bigger than any of us carries all of it." He paused. "'*Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden.*' That's for you, too. Especially for you."

He looked down at the rifle in his lap for a long moment.

Then he held it out to her.

“Luis would want you to have this,” he said. “Not me. You.”

Hannah stared at it.

“I don’t want to shoot anybody else,” she whispered.

“I know.” Jack’s voice was very gentle. “Neither did he. That’s why he’d want you to have it.” He pressed it into her hands. “Hang it on your wall. Clean it once a month. And when you look at it, remember that a cook from Toledo loved this town enough to die for it. That’s all.”

Hannah Voss took the rifle, and held it against her chest, and sat down on the floor beside Jack Reynolds’s cot, and wept.

Jack kept his hand on her shoulder until she was finished.

* * *

Hillside Cemetery

February 14 — 11:00 p.m.

The ground was frozen three feet down.

Noah Simmons had known it would be. He had dug the advance graves in October so that no one would have to wait for spring. But the advance graves were long since filled — by the influenza, by the fire on the farms, by the long night of shelling. There were none left.

And there were ninety dead.

So on the night of February fourteenth, the people of Ashwood came up to Hillside Cemetery with firewood.

They came by the hundreds, carrying wood on their backs and in wheelbarrows and in wagons pulled by horses. Split oak and hickory from the woodpiles of every house in town. Scrap lumber from the burned houses on the south side. Broken pallets from the rail yard. They built fires on the frozen ground in long rows across the new section of the cemetery — ninety fires, one for every grave — and lit them, and fed them, and kept them burning all night long, to thaw the earth.

It was how their great-great-grandparents had buried the dead in the winters of the 1800s, before there were backhoes. Samuel Graves remembered his grandfather describing it. *You build the fire and you keep it going till the ground softens. Then you rake the coals aside and dig a foot. Then you build the fire again.*

So they did.

From the courthouse roof, the cemetery on the hill west of town looked like a field of stars. Ninety fires burning in long rows in the dark, and around them, hundreds of small dark figures moving — feeding the flames, raking the coals, digging, resting, digging again. Their breath rose in clouds. Their shovels rang against the frozen earth.

And they sang.

Not all the time. Not loudly. But every so often, from somewhere on the hillside, a voice would begin a hymn, and it would spread from fire to fire across the dark cemetery and swell and fade and die away, and then there would be only the sound of the shovels again, and the crackle of the flames.

Ethan dug with Noah and Gary Voss and Kyle, at the fire beside the place where they would bury Hal Whitaker.

Around midnight, a figure came up the gravel lane from town in the dark, with a guard walking beside him carrying a lantern. A big, heavy man, moving slowly, with his head down.

Russ Keller.

He stopped at the edge of the firelight, beside Hal's grave. He did not say anything. The guard — a young volunteer from the south line — stood back a few paces, awkwardly, holding the lantern.

Gary Voss straightened up from his shovel and looked at him.

"He asked," the guard said, uncomfortably. "Mr. Keller. He asked the mayor if he could come up and dig. The mayor said it was up to you all."

Nobody said anything for a long time. The fire crackled.

Gary Voss had been shot through the leg defending the seed corn in the rail yard, beside Hal Whitaker, while Hal died. He was leaning on a crutch. He looked at Russ Keller across the firelight with an expression that Ethan could not read.

"You gave Kane Hal's farm," Gary said. His voice was flat. "The corn crib. The bins. You wrote it all down."

"Yes," Keller said.

"And you gave us the seed corn back. The stuff you hid. The stuff Hal died defending."

"Yes."

Gary was silent for a long moment. The firelight flickered across his weathered face.

Then he held out his shovel.

"Dig, then," he said roughly. "He'd want it deep. He always said the frost line in this county was forty-two inches, and anybody who dug a fence post shallower than that was a fool."

Russ Keller took the shovel. His hands were shaking.

He dug.

He dug for four hours, beside the fire at Hal Whitaker's grave, while the men around him raked the coals and fed the flames and spelled each other at the shovel. He did not stop when they stopped. He did not rest when they rested. He dug with his heavy shoulders bent and his breath coming in ragged gasps and the sweat freezing on his face, and he did not say a word the whole time.

At four in the morning, when the grave was forty-two inches deep, Gary Voss put his hand on Keller's shoulder.

"That's enough, Russ," he said quietly. "That's deep enough."

Keller stopped. He stood in the grave, up to his chest in the thawed earth, with the shovel in his hands, and looked up at Gary Voss.

Then his face crumpled, and he leaned on the shovel handle, and wept.

Gary Voss reached down, awkwardly, with his crutch under one arm, and pulled him up out of the grave.

* * *

Hillside Cemetery

February 15 — 1:00 p.m.

They buried them on a Sunday.

Ninety graves in long rows across the western slope of Hillside Cemetery, the raw earth dark against the snow, each one marked with a wooden cross that Noah's youth group had cut and lettered by hand over two sleepless nights. Six thousand people stood on the hillside in the cold. Nearly the whole town. The refugees from the Hollow, too, who had come up Route 13 in a long silent column that morning to bury their own twenty-six. And a hundred and twelve prisoners — boys from Harlan's Crossing and Brinkley and Galion in their Iron Alliance camouflage, unarmed, under light guard — who had asked, through Evan Lowe, if they might attend.

At the eastern edge of the new section, in a separate row, were sixty-one more graves. Smaller crosses. Some with names. Most without.

Kane's dead.

Mayor Daniel Brooks had insisted. There had been a fierce argument about it in the commissioners' chamber on the thirteenth — men who had lost sons and brothers and fathers in the night, who could not bear the thought of digging graves for the men who had killed them. Brooks had listened to all of it. Then he had said, quietly, *We are not Marcus Kane. He left them in the snow. We don't leave anybody in the snow.* And Evan Lowe and forty of the prisoners had spent the night of the fourteenth at the eastern edge of the cemetery, thawing the ground with their own fires, digging graves for the boys they had marched into Ashwood beside.

Samuel Graves stood at the head of the rows, on a wooden platform that Gary Voss's crew had built that morning. He was bareheaded in the cold. His silver hair lifted in the wind. His hands, still bandaged from the padlock at the burning barn, rested on the head of his hickory cane.

He did not speak for a long time. He simply looked out at the rows of graves, and the six thousand people standing among them, and the prisoners at the edge of the crowd, and the separate row of smaller crosses at the eastern edge.

Then he opened his wife's old *Book of Common Prayer*.

"*I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.*"

His voice carried across the hillside in the still, cold air.

"*I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God.*"

He closed the book.

"I'm not a preacher," Samuel said. "Everybody here knows that. I'm a soybean farmer who got saved at seventy-four because my wife left her Bible on the nightstand when the Lord came for her." A faint murmur of something that was almost laughter moved through the crowd. "I don't know how to do this. I've never buried ninety people at once. I don't think anybody has, in this county, since the Civil War."

He looked down at the nearest grave. Hal Whitaker's.

"So I'm just going to tell you what I know," he said. "And it isn't much."

* * *

"I know that we won," Samuel Graves said. "Kane came into this town with nine hundred men and two cannons, and we sent him home with a hole in his shoulder. That's true. It happened. We're standing here." He paused. "And I know that it doesn't feel like winning. Not to me. Not to any of you. It feels like losing. It feels like the worst thing that's ever happened."

The hillside was absolutely silent.

"That's because it *is*," Samuel said. "Ninety of our people are lying in these graves. Our friends. Our neighbors. Our husbands and sons and fathers. And sixty-one boys from the other side, who had mothers too. We won the battle. But we lost them." His voice cracked. "And there's no winning that makes that all right. There isn't. I'm not going to stand up here and tell you there is."

He was quiet for a long time.

"When I was a young man," he said finally, "my granddaddy told me something. He fought in the Second World War. In the Pacific. Saipan. Okinawa. Places I'd never heard of. He came home and farmed this ground for fifty years and never talked about any of it. Not once. Until the night before he died, when I was twenty-two, and I was sitting with him in the hospital in Mansfield." Samuel looked out over the graves. "He said, *Sammy, there's no such thing as a good war. There's only wars that have to be fought. And the ones who fight them pay for the rest of their lives.*"

He paused.

"And then he said, *But I'll tell you what I learned on Okinawa. In the foxholes, when the shells were falling. I learned that there's a peace that doesn't have anything to do with whether the shooting stops. And I learned that it's the only kind worth having.*"

Samuel Graves looked down at the Bible in his hands.

“Jesus said it,” he said softly. “The night before He died. ‘*Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you.*’” He looked up. “Not as the world giveth. The world gives peace when the shooting stops. When the treaties get signed. When the man on the radio says so.” He shook his head slowly. “Jesus gives peace in the foxhole. In the church basement while the ceiling shakes. On top of a burning grain elevator, with a sixteen-year-old girl holding your hand.”

Somewhere in the crowd, someone was sobbing.

“The men and women in these graves,” Samuel said, “most of them had that peace. The kind that doesn’t depend on anything. Luis Ortega died saying the Twenty-third Psalm in Spanish. Hal Whitaker died quoting Genesis about seedtime and harvest. Walt Kimble died in his front yard on Chestnut Street, and when they found him, he had his Bible in his coat pocket, open to the fourteenth chapter of John.” His voice broke. “‘*Let not your heart be troubled.*’”

He could not go on for a moment. He stood on the wooden platform with his bandaged hands on his cane and his head bowed.

When he lifted it again, his face was wet.

“So we’ll grieve,” he said. “We’ll grieve hard, and we’ll grieve long, and we won’t pretend we’re not. Jesus wept at Lazarus’s grave, and He knew He was about to raise him. We’re allowed to weep.” He looked out over the hillside. “But we won’t grieve like people who have no hope. Because we *have* hope. These people aren’t gone. They’re just gone *ahead.* And one of these days — sooner than any of us think, maybe — the trumpet’s going to sound, and the dead in Christ are going to rise, and every grave on this hill is going to open like a door.”

He raised one gnarled, bandaged hand toward the sky.

“‘*For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout,*’” he said, and his gravelly old voice rang out across the frozen hillside, “‘*with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first… Wherefore comfort one another with these words.*’”

He lowered his hand.

“Comfort one another,” Samuel Graves said. “That’s all. That’s all I’ve got. Comfort one another.”

He stepped down from the platform.

For a long moment, the hillside was silent.

Then, from somewhere near the eastern edge of the crowd — near the separate row of smaller crosses, where the prisoners from Harlan’s Crossing stood — a single young voice began to sing. Thin and shaking and off-key.

“*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound…*”

Ethan turned to look. It was Evan Lowe. Standing at the head of the row of Kane’s dead, in his Iron Alliance camouflage, with his hands clasped in front of him and tears running down his face.

“*That saved a wretch like me…*”

And then the boy beside him joined in. Tanner Gibbs. And then the others — the prisoners, one by one, the boys from Harlan's Crossing and Brinkley and Galion who had come to Ashwood to burn it. And then the refugees from the Hollow. And then the people of Ashwood.

Six thousand voices on a frozen hillside, over a hundred and fifty-one graves.

"*I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind, but now I see.*"

* * *

Sycamore Street

February 16 — 4:20 p.m.

The house was gone.

Ethan had known it would be. He had seen it burning from the end of the alley on the night of the battle. But he had not come back since. He had not been able to.

Now he stood on the sidewalk on Sycamore Street in the gray afternoon light and looked at what was left.

A stone foundation. A brick chimney, blackened, standing alone. A tangle of charred beams and twisted metal in the cellar hole. The iron frame of a bed. The melted remains of a refrigerator. Snow had fallen the night before and lay in a thin white layer over all of it, softening the edges, so that the ruin looked almost peaceful.

The rose bushes along the fence were still there.

They were brown and bare and dormant, their canes scorched on the side nearest the house. But they were there. Emily had planted them the first spring they lived here. *Knockout roses,* she had said. *They're impossible to kill. Even for you.*

He stood at the fence and looked at them for a long time.

He heard footsteps on the sidewalk behind him. He did not turn.

"Rebecca told me you'd be here," Sarah said.

She came and stood beside him at the fence. She did not say anything else. She just stood there with him in the cold, looking at the ruin.

After a long time, Ethan spoke.

"I carried the drawing out," he said. "The one from the refrigerator. And her Bible. And the picture of my daughter." He touched the inside pocket of his coat. "That's all I took. I stood in that kitchen with bullets coming through the window, and those were the only things I wanted."

"That's all that mattered," Sarah said softly.

"Yeah." He looked at the chimney. "Eleven years. She painted every room in that house. Herself. She hung the wind chime on the back porch. She planted these roses." He was quiet for a moment. "I used to think if I kept everything exactly the way she left it — her glasses on the windowsill, her mug on the

hook — I'd be keeping *her*, somehow. Like she'd come home one day and everything would be waiting."

He shook his head slowly.

"But she's not coming home," he said. "Not here. She's already home. She has been since April." He looked down at the scorched rose canes. "I think I needed the house to burn to finally understand that."

Sarah did not say anything. She reached over and took his hand, the way she had in the courthouse square at dawn.

Ethan looked down at their joined hands for a long moment.

"Sarah," he said. "I don't know what I'm feeling. About you. About — this." He swallowed. "I loved her. I still love her. I'm always going to love her. And I don't know if it's right, to —"

"Ethan." Sarah's voice was very gentle. "I'm not asking you to stop loving her."

He looked at her.

"I'm not asking you for anything," she said. "Not today. Maybe not for a long time. I know what she was to you. I know what you've lost." Her eyes were bright. "I just want to stand here with you. That's all. While you look at her roses."

Ethan held her hand, and did not answer.

But he did not let go.

They stood together at the fence on Sycamore Street in the gray February light, looking at the ruin of a house and a row of scorched rose bushes that were impossible to kill, until the sun went down.

"*To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted… A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.*"

* * *

The Courthouse Command Center

February 17 — 9:00 a.m.

"We won," Mayor Brooks said. "And we're still starving."

He said it without bitterness. He said it the way he might have read a ledger at the car dealership — a plain statement of fact.

Around the walnut table, the council sat in silence. Ethan. Sarah. Rebecca. Samuel. Mercer. Rachel. Jack, propped up in a chair against doctor's orders, with a pillow behind his back and his face gray. Gary Voss, on crutches, sitting in Hal Whitaker's chair because Hal had asked him to take over the grain accounts if anything ever happened to him. Tess Albright, representing the clinic.

Two empty chairs. Luis Ortega's. Hal Whitaker's, which Gary sat in without looking at it.

"Give it to us, Gary," Brooks said.

Gary Voss unfolded a sheet of paper with shaking hands. It was in Hal’s handwriting — the last count Hal had made, on the afternoon of the eleventh, before the shelling — with Gary’s own corrections in pencil beneath it.

“We lost half the elevator,” he said. “About four thousand bushels saved. Plus what we moved from the farms before the fires. Plus the seed corn from Russ’s cellar, which we’re not touching.” He looked up. “At current rations — which are already half what they were in October — we’ve got till about the twenty-eighth. Two weeks. Maybe a few days more.”

“And then?”

Gary didn’t answer.

“We captured Kane’s supply trucks on Route 13,” Mercer said. “The people from the Hollow did. Four trucks. There was food in them — rations for his army. Maybe enough for another week, for the whole town.”

“That gets us to early March,” Gary said. “Mid-March if we’re careful.”

“And planting’s in April,” Brooks said. “And harvest isn’t till July.”

Nobody spoke.

“Kane’s not finished,” Mercer said quietly. “I want everyone to understand that. We hurt him. We hurt him badly. He lost a hundred and fifty men and a hundred and twelve more surrendered, and he’s got a bullet in his shoulder, and his reserves ran from a crowd with pitchforks.” He looked around the table. “But he’s still got six hundred men. He’s still got seventeen towns. He’s still got the charter from the Office, and the Office is still going to send him relief in the spring.” He paused. “And we’re still an island. With no food, no ammunition to speak of, and ninety fresh graves on the hill.”

“So what did we win?” Rachel asked quietly.

It was not a challenge. It was a real question. She was looking at Mercer with her gray eyes wide open, as if she genuinely did not know.

Mercer did not answer. Neither did anyone else.

It was Rebecca who finally spoke.

“We won the right to keep choosing,” she said.

Everyone turned to her.

She was sitting at the end of the table with her father’s Bible closed in front of her. Her face was tired and pale, and her eyes were red from three days of weeping. But her voice was steady.

“That’s all,” she said. “That’s what we won. Kane wanted to take it away. The right to decide who we’d feed, and who we’d worship, and whose name we’d write in whose book. And we didn’t let him.” She looked around the table. “We’re still hungry. We’re still surrounded. We’re still going to bury more people before spring. But we still get to *choose*.” She paused. “Nobody else in seven counties can say that. Nobody.”

The room was quiet.

"'*Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free,*'" she said softly. "'*And be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.*' Galatians five." She looked down at the Bible. "Dad preached on it every Fourth of July. I used to roll my eyes." She almost smiled. "I'm not rolling them now."

* * *

South Gate, Ashwood

February 19 — 5:40 p.m.

The wagon came up Route 13 at dusk, under a white flag.

The watchtower on the roof of the old Dairy Queen saw it first — a single horse-drawn farm wagon, moving slowly north past the burned-out school buses and the twisted railroad hedgehogs, with a bedsheet tied to a pole on its seat. One driver. And in the bed of the wagon, huddled together under blankets, a cluster of dark shapes.

The bells did not ring. The watchtower radioed the gate. The gate radioed the courthouse.

By the time the wagon reached the new roadblock at the south end of town — built in three days from the wreckage of the old one — Ethan was there. So was Mercer. So was Danny Haskins, on his crutches, who had been at the clinic visiting Marcus Webb and heard the radio call and come running, as fast as a boy with a healing leg can run.

The driver was a boy. Fourteen, maybe. Gangly and sharp-featured, with dark eyes, in a Cleveland Browns sweatshirt beneath a too-big Army parka. He pulled the horse to a stop at the roadblock and sat there on the wagon seat with the reins in his hands, looking up at the rifles pointed at him, his face pale and set.

"I'm not armed," he said. "There's nobody armed in the wagon. My father sent me."

"Who's your father?" Mercer asked.

The boy looked at him.

"Marcus Kane," Tyler Kane said.

Nobody moved.

Then, in the bed of the wagon, one of the dark shapes under the blankets stirred, and sat up slowly, and pushed the blanket back. A huge man, gaunt and bearded, his face hollowed out by six weeks of cold and hunger, his nose healed crooked where it had been broken. His eyes were sunk deep in his skull.

But Ethan knew him at once.

"Uncle Carl!"

Danny Haskins threw his crutches aside and scrambled over the sandbags of the roadblock, stumbling, falling, getting up again, and ran the last ten yards to the wagon on his healing leg with his arms

outstretched. And Carl Haskins came over the side of the wagon bed and dropped to his knees in the snow on Route 13 and caught his nephew in his arms and held him, and the two of them knelt there in the road in the dusk and wept.

Behind Carl, one by one, the others sat up under their blankets. Bill and Nancy Stroud. Frank Oyler. Marcy Allen, the schoolteacher. Three more whose names Ethan did not know. Seven of them, thin and filthy and blinking in the last light of the day.

Ten people had been taken to the quarry with Carl in December. Pastor Ron Deckard had died there in February. Two others had not survived the cold.

Seven were left. And they were here.

Ethan walked slowly up to the wagon seat and looked at the boy holding the reins.

“Your father sent you,” he said.

“Yes, sir.”

“Why?”

Tyler Kane reached into the pocket of his parka and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. He held it out.

Ethan took it and unfolded it. It was written in a neat, firm, slanting hand, with a good pen. The same hand as the notes in the pickle jar. But the letters were not quite as steady as they had been. The hand that wrote them had been in pain.

Walker —

You had me on my knees in your square, and you lowered your rifle. You let Kessler carry me out.

I don’t understand why. I’ve been lying in this bed for six days trying to understand it, and I can’t.

I don’t owe you anything. I want that clear. What happened in Ashwood changes nothing between us. When the thaw comes, I will do what I have to do.

But I don’t like debts. I never have.

So here are your people from Millbrook. The ones who are left. Haskins can tell you what happened to the others. I’m not proud of it.

My son asked to bring them. I let him. Don’t read anything into that.

— M.K.

Ethan read it twice. Then he folded it and put it in his inside pocket, with the crayon drawing and Emily’s Bible and the photograph of his daughter.

He looked up at Tyler Kane.

“Did he tell you to say anything?” he asked. “Anything else?”

Tyler shook his head.

“No, sir.” He hesitated. Then, very quietly: “But I wanted to say something. If that’s okay.”

“Go ahead.”

The boy looked down at the reins in his hands. Then up at Ethan. His dark eyes — his mother’s eyes — were wet.

“He hasn’t slept,” Tyler said. “Since he got back. He just lies there. He keeps asking me what you said to him. In the square. He asked me to tell him about Mom. About what she used to read me.” His voice shook. “Last night he asked me to read him something. From her Bible. He’s never asked that before. Not ever.”

Ethan felt something turn over in his chest.

“What did you read him?” he asked.

Tyler swallowed.

“Luke fifteen,” he said. “The prodigal son. It was the tape I listened to first. The one from the coffee can.” He wiped his eyes with his sleeve. “He didn’t say anything. He just turned his face to the wall. But he didn’t tell me to stop.”

For a long moment, nobody at the roadblock said anything at all.

Then Ethan reached up and put his hand on the boy’s knee.

“Tyler,” he said. “Keep reading to him.”

Tyler Kane nodded. He could not speak.

“Can you get home before dark?” Ethan asked. “Do you want to stay the night? We’ll feed you. Nobody will hurt you here.”

“I have to go back,” Tyler said. “He’s waiting.” He gathered up the reins. Then he stopped, and looked back over his shoulder at Carl Haskins kneeling in the snow with his nephew in his arms. “Mr. Haskins sang the whole way here,” he said. “In the back of the wagon. All of them did. The whole twenty-six miles.” He almost smiled. “I didn’t know most of the songs. But I think I’m going to learn them.”

He clucked to the horse and turned the wagon around in the road, and started back south down Route 13 in the dusk, alone, a fourteen-year-old boy in a Cleveland Browns sweatshirt driving a farm wagon toward Iron Ridge.

Ethan watched him until he disappeared over the crest of the hill.

* * *

First Baptist Church — The Bell Tower

February 19 — 11:30 p.m.

Noah Simmons was on watch in the bell tower when he saw the light.

It was not a raider’s light. It was not a patrol. It was a single lantern, far out on State Route 39 to the north, beyond the middle ring — small and steady and moving slowly, the way a man moves when he is walking alone on a long road at night.

Noah raised the binoculars.

A man. Tall, and thin, walking north to south along the shoulder of the highway toward Ashwood, in the snow. He carried a lantern in one hand and a long walking staff in the other. He wore a heavy dark coat that came almost to his ankles, and no hat, and his hair — long and white, or perhaps only silver in the starlight — moved in the wind.

He was not hurrying. He was not afraid. He walked down the middle of the empty highway through the dark as though he had walked a thousand such roads, on a thousand such nights, and knew exactly where he was going.

Noah watched him for a long time.

He did not ring the bell. He did not know why. There was nothing threatening about the man. Nothing at all. Only — something about the way he walked. Something about the lantern, small and steady in the vast dark country.

Noah keyed his radio.

"Tower to north gate," he said quietly. "There's a man coming down Thirty-Nine. On foot. Alone. Carrying a lantern." He paused. "I don't think he's dangerous. But — let him in, when he gets there. Feed him. And somebody tell Rebecca."

"*North gate to tower. Copy. Who is he?*"

Noah watched the small light moving down the long dark road.

"I don't know," he said. "But I think he's been walking a long way to get here."

He lowered the binoculars and stood in the bell tower beneath the great iron bell, looking out at the lantern in the dark. And for no reason he could name, a verse rose up in his mind — one he had heard on Pastor Whitfield's tapes, one he had never quite understood.

"*How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!*"

— Isaiah 52:7

* * *

END OF CHAPTER 17

CHAPTER 18

A New Voice

“*Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness.*”

— Joel 2:12–13

* * *

North Checkpoint, State Route 39

February 20 — 6:15 a.m.

He was sitting on an overturned bucket beside the fire barrel when Rebecca got there, eating soup.

The volunteers at the north checkpoint had let him in at a quarter to one in the morning, the way Noah had asked. They had searched him and found nothing — no weapon, no pack, no papers. Only the lantern, the walking staff, the long dark coat, and a small black Bible so worn that its cover had come loose from the spine and was held on with a strip of leather. They had given him a blanket and a cup of chicory and a place by the fire, and told him to wait for morning.

He had waited. He had not slept, the volunteers said. He had sat by the fire all night with the Bible open on his knee, reading by the light of the flames, and sometimes his lips moved.

Now, in the gray dawn, he looked up as Rebecca came through the gap in the barricade, and set down the tin cup.

He was old. That was the first thing she noticed. Older than Samuel — seventy-five, perhaps eighty, though it was hard to tell. His hair was white and long, falling past his collar, and his beard was white and cut short. His face was deeply lined and brown from sun and wind, the face of a man who had spent most of his life outdoors. He was tall even sitting down, and thin almost to gauntness, with big knuckled hands wrapped around the tin cup.

And his eyes were gray. Pale gray, like winter sky, and very clear.

He did not look luminous. He did not look like the man in the spotlight in Geneva. He looked like an old farmer, or a retired railroad man, or someone’s grandfather who had walked too far in the cold.

“You’re Caleb Whitfield’s girl,” he said.

His voice was rough and low, with an accent Rebecca could not place — southern, maybe, or Appalachian, worn down by years and miles into something plain and unhurried.

Rebecca stopped.

“How do you know that?”

“You’ve got his Bible.” He nodded at the black Scofield under her arm. “And his face. Around the eyes.” He set the cup on the ground beside him. “I heard him preach once. Long time ago. A revival meeting in a tent outside Hazard, Kentucky. Summer of ’98. He was a young man then, just starting out. Preached on Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones.” Something that was almost a smile moved in the white beard. “Wasn’t much of a preacher yet. Too many notes. But he meant every word. You could tell.”

Rebecca stared at him.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“My name’s Elijah Cross.” He said it simply, the way a man gives his name at a feed store counter. “I’m a preacher. Of sorts. I walk.” He looked out past the barricade, at the long white road running north toward Millbrook. “I’ve been walking since April. Pennsylvania. West Virginia. Indiana. Kentucky. Down through the camps along the river. Up through the towns in the middle. Wherever the Lord sends me.” He looked back at her. “He sent me here.”

“Why?”

Elijah Cross was quiet for a moment.

“Because you’ve buried a hundred and fifty people on that hill,” he said. “And you’re tired. All of you. Right down to the bone.” He picked up the tin cup again and turned it slowly in his big hands. “Tired people forget things. Even good people. Even people who’ve seen what you’ve seen.” He looked up at her with those clear gray eyes. “I came to help you remember.”

* * *

The Courthouse Command Center

February 20 — 8:00 a.m.

“We don’t know anything about him,” Jack said.

He was sitting propped up in his chair against Sarah’s orders, with his side bandaged under his shirt and a mug of chicory in his hand, looking at the old man who sat alone at the far end of the walnut table with his hands folded on his worn black Bible.

Elijah Cross did not seem offended. He sat patiently, listening, the way a man listens to a weather report.

“We know he walked in off Thirty-Nine in the middle of the night with no gun and no pack,” Mercer said from the window. “We know he says he’s been walking since April through half the Midwest. We know he says he heard Rebecca’s father preach in Kentucky in 1998.” He turned and looked at the old man. “That’s all we know.”

“He knows Scripture,” Samuel Graves said slowly.

“So does the devil,” Jack said. “Rebecca’s own father said so. False prophets, false christs, deceiving the very elect. It’s on the tapes.” He set down his mug. “I’m sorry, sir. I don’t mean any offense. But a week ago nine hundred men tried to take this town. The man on the radio is a wolf in sheep’s clothing,

and half the world thinks he's the Messiah. And now a stranger walks in out of the dark and wants to preach to our people." He shook his head. "I don't think it's unreasonable to be careful."

"It isn't," said Elijah Cross.

Everyone turned.

"It isn't unreasonable," the old man said again, in his rough, unhurried voice. "It's wise. The Lord commands it." He opened his worn Bible without looking at it — it fell open at a place that had been opened ten thousand times — and read aloud. "'*Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.*'" He closed it. "First John four. So try me. Ask me whatever you want."

For a long moment, nobody spoke.

Then Samuel Graves leaned forward on his cane.

"The next verse," the old farmer said. "Read me the next verse."

Elijah Cross did not open the Bible. He looked at Samuel across the table.

"'*Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.*'"

"Do you confess it?" Samuel asked quietly.

"I do." The old man's voice did not change. "Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, came in the flesh. Born of a virgin in Bethlehem. Lived without sin. Died on a Roman cross outside Jerusalem for the sins of the whole world — mine first, I'd say, if we're counting. Buried in a borrowed tomb. Raised bodily from the dead on the third day. Ascended to the right hand of the Father. Came for His Church in the air ten months ago, just as He said He would." He paused. "And He's coming again, in glory, on a white horse, with the armies of heaven behind Him, to judge the living and the dead and make all things new. And every knee is going to bow. Including the one in Geneva."

The room was silent.

"And the man on the radio?" Rebecca asked. "What do you say about him?"

Elijah Cross looked at her for a long moment.

"I say he's the most dangerous man who's ever lived," he said. "And I say his time is short. And I say that every man, woman, and child in this town needs to be ready — not for him, but for Who comes after him." He folded his hands on the Bible. "That's all I've got to say about him. I'm not here to talk about the man on the radio. I'm here to talk about Jesus."

Samuel Graves looked at him for a long, long time with his faded blue eyes.

Then the old farmer sat back in his chair.

"Let him preach," he said.

* * *

The Courthouse Square

February 20 — 12:00 p.m.

He did not ask for a pulpit.

He did not ask for a church, or a crowd, or a stage. He simply walked out of the courthouse at noon and down the steps to the ruined square, where the crater still gaped in the frozen lawn and the bent flagpole still leaned over it with the tattered flag, and he stopped beside the cardboard box of photographs that still sat on the courthouse steps where Rebecca had left it.

He looked down at the box for a long time.

Then he picked up the photograph on top — a little girl in a pink rain slicker, holding up a tadpole in a jelly jar — and looked at it. And then he set it back down, very gently, and turned around, and began to speak.

There were perhaps forty people in the square when he started. Refugees warming their hands at a fire barrel. Volunteers from the work crews clearing the rubble on Main Street. A few women from the ration line at the Rialto. Nobody had told them there would be preaching. Most of them did not look up.

He did not raise his voice.

“You won,” Elijah Cross said.

A few heads turned.

“You won,” he said again. “Nine hundred men came against you with cannons, and you sent them home. I’ve walked through a lot of towns since April. Most of them didn’t win. Most of them aren’t there anymore.” He looked around the square — at the crater, the shattered windows, the burned buildings on the south end of Main Street. “You won. And you’re standing here in the ashes of it, and you don’t know why it feels so much like losing.”

More heads were turning now. A man at the fire barrel stopped rubbing his hands. A woman from the ration line set down her bucket.

“I’ll tell you why,” Elijah Cross said. “It’s because you’ve been fighting for so long, you forgot what you were fighting *for*.”

* * *

By one o’clock, there were three hundred people in the square.

By two, a thousand.

Ethan did not know how the word spread. It simply did — the way it always did in Ashwood, from the ration line to the tool library to the clinic to the church basements to the farms. *There’s a preacher in the square. An old man. Nobody knows where he came from. You have to hear him.* People came from every direction. Farmers in from the outer ring. Refugees from the Hollow, walking up Route 13. Volunteers from the barricades, still carrying their rifles. Mothers with babies. Old men on canes.

The prisoners from Harlan's Crossing came, under guard. Evan Lowe and Tanner Gibbs and the others, standing at the back of the crowd in their Iron Alliance camouflage.

Carl Haskins came, gaunt and hollow-eyed, leaning on Danny's shoulder.

Ethan stood at the edge of the square beside Sarah and listened.

The old man did not shout. He never shouted. He stood beside the box of photographs at the foot of the courthouse steps and spoke in that rough, low, unhurried voice, and somehow it carried to every corner of the square — to the back of the crowd, to the people standing on the sidewalks of Main Street, to the ones who had climbed onto the burned-out cars and the sandbag walls to see.

He did not tell them they were heroes. He did not tell them they were victims.

He told them they were sinners.

"You've been telling yourselves a story," Elijah Cross said. "I know, because every town tells it. The story is: *We're the good ones. They're the bad ones. God's on our side.*" He shook his head slowly. "And some of that's true. You fought a wicked man. You protected the weak. You fed the hungry at your gate. The Lord saw all of it."

He paused.

"But that's not the whole story. Is it?"

The square was very quiet.

"Some of you stole from your neighbors this winter," he said. "Not Kane's men. *You.* A ham from a smokehouse. A sack of cornmeal from the back of a wagon. Firewood from a widow's pile. You told yourself your family needed it more." He looked out over the crowd. "Some of you hoarded. You sat on gasoline and bullets and canned peaches in your cellar while your neighbors stood in the ration line. You told yourself it was prudence."

A man near the front shifted uncomfortably and looked at the ground.

"Some of you hated," Elijah Cross said. "Not the sin. The sinner. You hated the refugees for eating your food. You hated the preachers for bringing the war down on you. You hated the man who sold your town, and you're hating him still, down in that cell under this courthouse, and you want him hanged." His gray eyes moved slowly across the crowd. "And some of you hate the boys standing at the back of this square in their camouflage, who burned your farms. You want them dead too."

At the back of the crowd, Evan Lowe bowed his head.

"And some of you," the old man said, more softly, "have been trusting in the walls. The barricades. The rifles. The man on the roof with the binoculars. The mayor. The doctor. The commander." He glanced — just once — at Ethan, standing at the edge of the square. "Good men and women, all of them. But they're not your Savior. And some of you have forgotten that. You've been trusting in the arm of flesh, and when the arm of flesh bled and died on the top of a grain elevator, your hearts broke, because you didn't have anything else to trust in."

Someone in the crowd let out a sob.

“I’m not saying this to condemn you,” Elijah Cross said. “God knows I’m the worst sinner I ever met. I’m saying it because it’s *true.* And because the Lord can’t heal what you won’t let Him see.” He opened his worn black Bible and read aloud from the second chapter of Joel.

“‘*Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil.*’”

He closed the book.

“Rend your heart,” he said. “Not your garments. Not a show. Not a list of good deeds. Your *heart.* Tear it open and let Him see what’s inside. The fear. The hatred. The pride. The grief.” His voice softened. “He already knows. He’s always known. He’s just waiting for you to stop hiding it.”

He looked out at the silent crowd.

“And then,” he said, “watch what He does. Because the next verses — oh, the next verses.” For the first time, something moved in his weathered face — a light, a warmth, something that was almost joy. “‘*I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten.… And ye shall eat in plenty, and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, that hath dealt wondrously with you: and my people shall never be ashamed.*’”

He stood there beside the box of photographs, an old man in a long dark coat in the ruins of a town square, with his Bible in his hands.

“That’s all,” he said. “That’s all I came to say. Turn. Rend your hearts. And let Him restore what the locusts ate.”

And then he simply stopped talking, and bowed his head, and waited.

* * *

For a long time, nobody moved.

Then a man near the front of the crowd — a farmer Ethan knew slightly, a man named Dennis Grubb who had a hog operation on Township Road 9 — stepped forward out of the crowd and walked up to the courthouse steps. He was carrying something wrapped in brown paper under his arm.

He did not stop in front of Elijah Cross. He walked past him, to the edge of the crowd, where Doc Lindquist was standing on crutches with his wounded leg in a cast.

Dennis Grubb held out the package.

“It’s a ham,” he said hoarsely. “From your smokehouse. December. I took it the night the Mansfield people came through, and I told everybody the refugees took it.” His face was red. “I’ve got two more in my cellar. I’ll bring them tomorrow.”

Doc Lindquist stared at him. Then at the ham.

Then the old veterinarian leaned his crutch against his hip, took the package in both hands, and — to everyone's astonishment, including his own — began to laugh. And then the laugh turned into something else, and he put his arm around Dennis Grubb's shoulders, and the two old men stood there in the square holding a ham between them, weeping.

Then a woman came forward. She did not bring anything. She simply stood at the foot of the courthouse steps and said, loud enough for the whole square to hear, *I've got forty gallons of gasoline in my garage that I never turned in. Jack's people asked, and I lied. I'm sorry.*

Then another. *I stole firewood from the Pruett woodpile. After Glen died. I knew his wife was alone. I took it anyway.*

Then another. *I spray-painted the church doors. In November. "Your God can't feed us." That was me.*

And then Gary Voss.

He came forward slowly, on his crutches, through the crowd, and stopped at the foot of the steps. He looked up at the old man. Then he turned around and looked at the crowd — six thousand faces, or near enough.

"I hate Russ Keller," he said. His voice was rough and shaking. "God help me. I handed him a shovel on Valentine's night and let him dig Hal's grave, and I told myself that was forgiveness. It wasn't. I did it so I could watch him suffer." He swallowed hard. "I want him to hang. Every night since Hal died, I lie awake and think about it. And I sit in church on Sunday and sing *Amazing Grace* and I don't mean a word of it."

He turned back to Elijah Cross.

"I don't know how to stop," he whispered. "I don't know how."

The old preacher came down the courthouse steps and put his big, knuckled hand on Gary Voss's shoulder.

"You don't," Elijah Cross said gently. "Not by yourself. Nobody can. You just tell Him what you told us. And then you ask Him to do it for you. Every day. As many times as it takes." He looked into the dairy farmer's red, wet eyes. "Peter asked Jesus how many times he had to forgive his brother. Seven times? And Jesus said, *Seventy times seven.* That's not arithmetic, son. That's a lifetime." He squeezed Gary's shoulder. "Start today. Start right now. That's all He asks."

Gary Voss bowed his head.

And then, all across the square, people were kneeling.

Not the way they had knelt on the night of the candlelight vigil, or on the morning after the battle, when the flag went up. This was different. This was quieter, and heavier, and more broken. People knelt in the snow and the rubble and the ashes and wept — not for the dead, this time, but for themselves. For what they had done. For what they had become, in the long dark winter, without noticing. Neighbors turned to neighbors and confessed things they had never said out loud. Husbands and wives held each other. A refugee from Mansfield crossed the square to the old woman whose smokehouse he had robbed in January and knelt at her feet.

At the back of the crowd, Evan Lowe and Tanner Gibbs and forty boys from Harlan's Crossing knelt in their Iron Alliance camouflage in the snow.

And at the edge of the square, Daniel Mercer stood very still with his arm in its sling, watching all of it. His lean face was unreadable.

Ethan looked at him.

Mercer did not look back. He was looking at the old man in the long dark coat, standing at the foot of the courthouse steps with his hand on Gary Voss's shoulder.

And after a long time, very slowly, the former chief warrant officer of Army Intelligence — twenty-one years, Iraq, Afghanistan, two tours in places he still was not allowed to name — took his arm out of its sling, and knelt down in the snow.

* * *

The Courthouse — Holding Room

February 21 — 10:00 p.m.

Elijah Cross went to see Russ Keller on the second night.

Nobody sent him. He simply asked Ethan, after the evening meeting in First Baptist Church — which had filled the sanctuary and the balcony and the foyer and spilled out onto the lawn, the way the meetings had filled every night since the square — whether the man in the cell under the courthouse had any visitors.

"His daughter," Ethan said. "Samuel. Rebecca. Noah, sometimes."

"Does he want to see a stranger?"

"I don't know. You can ask."

Keller did want to see him. Ethan unlocked the door himself, and stood in the doorway while the old man went in and lowered himself onto the steel bench beside the heavy, gray-faced grain manager.

For a long time, neither of them spoke.

"They told me what you said in the square," Keller said finally. His voice was hoarse. "About Gary. About him wanting me to hang."

"He said it," Elijah Cross agreed. "He was honest. That took courage."

"He's right." Keller stared at the concrete floor. "I should hang. I gave them everything. Hal died because of me. Luis. Walt Kimble. Ninety people on that hill." His voice cracked. "I pray every night. I tell God I'm sorry. I mean it. I know He forgives me. Rebecca says so. The tape says so. I believe it." He pressed his hands against his face. "But I can't forgive *myself.* I can't. How can I? How can I just — walk around, eating their food, breathing their air, when Hal Whitaker's in the ground?"

Elijah Cross was quiet for a long moment.

"There's a story at the end of John's gospel," he said. "You know it?"

“The beach,” Keller whispered. “Peter. Ethan told me.”

“The beach.” The old man nodded. “After Jesus rose, He found Peter fishing. And He cooked him breakfast. And then He asked him three times — *Do you love Me?* — one for every time Peter denied Him. And Peter said yes, and yes, and yes. And it broke his heart to say it, because he knew what he’d done.” Elijah Cross paused. “And every time Peter said yes, Jesus gave him a job. *Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep. Feed my sheep.*”

Keller lifted his head slowly.

“He didn’t tell Peter to forgive himself,” the old man said. “He didn’t tell him to feel better. He didn’t tell him to go off somewhere and suffer. He told him to *feed sheep.*” He looked at Keller with those clear gray eyes. “That’s how the Lord heals a man who’s betrayed Him. Not by making him forget. By giving him something to do with the rest of his life that’s bigger than what he did wrong.”

“The town hasn’t decided what to do with me yet,” Keller said. “There’s going to be a trial. They might __”

“They might,” Elijah Cross said. “And you’ll face it, whatever it is. That’s justice, and you’ll accept it, because you owe it.” He put his hand on Keller’s heavy shoulder. “But whatever they decide, Russ — whether it’s a rope or a prison cell or a shovel for the rest of your life — the Lord has already decided what *He* wants from you. He wants you to feed His sheep. However you can. Wherever you are.” He almost smiled. “Even if it’s from a jail cell. Paul wrote half the New Testament from jail cells.”

Russ Keller stared at him for a long time.

“Feed His sheep,” he repeated slowly.

“Feed His sheep,” Elijah Cross said. “Start with the ones who hate you. That’s where Peter started, too.”

* * *

Sugar Run Creek

February 24 — 2:00 p.m.

They baptized in the creek.

The old baptistery behind the pulpit at First Baptist held one person at a time, and there were far too many people now to baptize there. So on the afternoon of the twenty-fourth, Samuel Graves and Elijah Cross and Isaiah Freeman and Noah Simmons walked down to Sugar Run Creek, where it ran behind the old Ashwood park at the east end of town, and Hal Whitaker’s hired men — Gary Voss’s now — broke the ice with axes.

The water was black and fast and bitterly cold.

Nineteen hundred people stood on the banks of the creek in the snow.

Rachel Monroe did the counting. She had been counting since the first day in the square. She stood on the bank with a notebook in her hand and wrote down every name, the way she had written down the names of the dead a week before. Only this time, it was a different kind of list.

Nineteen hundred and forty-one, she wrote at the top of the page, when the counting was done. *Professions of faith since February 20. Ashwood, the Hollow, and the prisoners of the Iron Alliance.*

And then, below it, before she handed the notebook to Rebecca and walked down to the water's edge herself:

Rachel Anne Monroe. 35. Journalist.

* * *

They went down into the water one by one.

Elijah Cross stood waist-deep in the black creek in his long dark coat, as though the cold did not touch him at all, with Samuel Graves on one side and Isaiah Freeman on the other, and they baptized them.

Tess Albright, the charge nurse from Mercy General, who came up out of the water gasping and laughing and shouting *Oh, that's COLD!* while nineteen orphans on the bank cheered.

Dale Kirby, the mail carrier from Diamond Street.

Travis Boone and his brother Cody, together, Cody still limping on his healing leg, the two of them holding hands as they went under.

Carl Haskins, who was so big that it took all three of them to lay him back in the water and bring him up again, and who came up weeping and saying *thank You, thank You, thank You,* the same prayer he had prayed on his knees in the snow behind the gymnasium in December.

Evan Lowe, and Tanner Gibbs, and thirty-four boys from Harlan's Crossing, in their Iron Alliance camouflage, one after another after another.

Rachel Monroe, who went down into the black water with her eyes closed and came up with her eyes open, and stood there in the creek for a long moment looking up at the gray February sky with an expression that Ethan, watching from the bank, would remember for the rest of his life.

And Daniel Mercer.

He was the last. He came down the bank alone, after everyone else had gone, with his wounded arm held close to his side. He waded out into the creek to where the three old men were waiting, and stood there in the freezing water, and looked at Elijah Cross.

"I don't know how to say this," he said. "I've spent twenty-one years not believing anything I couldn't verify. I've interrogated men who lied to me for a living. I've read ten thousand intelligence reports." He swallowed. "And I stood in that square on Thursday and listened to you, and I couldn't find a single thing that wasn't true."

"It's all true, son," Elijah Cross said gently. "Every word of it."

“I know.” Mercer’s voice broke. “I know it is. I think I’ve known since the tapes. Since Tape Nine. The soldier.” He looked down at the black water swirling around his waist. “I just didn’t want to say it out loud.”

“Say it now,” the old man said.

Daniel Mercer lifted his head and looked up at the gray sky.

“Jesus Christ is Lord,” he said.

And Elijah Cross laid him back into the water.

* * *

Hillside Cemetery

February 27 — 5:30 p.m.

Ethan found him on the hill at sunset, sitting on a stone bench in the old section of the cemetery, beside the granite headstone Ethan had carved for Emily and their daughter in the summer.

EMILY ANNE WALKER AND OUR DAUGHTER “**NOT LOST — ONLY GONE BEFORE.**” **CAUGHT UP TO MEET THE LORD**

Elijah Cross was reading it. He did not look up when Ethan came through the iron gate. He simply moved over on the bench to make room.

Ethan sat down beside him.

For a long time, neither of them said anything. Below them, the long rows of new graves stretched down the western slope of the hill, dark against the snow. Beyond them, the town. The courthouse with its boarded windows. The half-burned grain elevator. The bell tower of First Baptist, where Noah was keeping watch. The smoke from a thousand chimneys rising straight up into the still, cold air.

“You carved this yourself,” Elijah Cross said.

“Yes, sir.”

“The letters aren’t straight.”

“No, sir.”

“It’s the most beautiful stone on the hill.”

Ethan laughed despite himself. “That’s what Rebecca said.”

“Rebecca’s a wise woman.” The old man was quiet for a moment. “Her father would be proud of her. And of you.”

Ethan looked down at his hands.

“Can I ask you something?” he said.

“You can ask.”

“How long?”

Elijah Cross did not pretend not to understand.

“I don’t know the day or the hour,” he said. “Nobody does. Not even the angels. The Lord said so.” He looked out over the town. “But I know the pattern. And so do you. You’ve been reading your wife’s Bible. You’ve been listening to Caleb Whitfield’s tapes.”

“The man on the radio,” Ethan said. “He’s going to Jerusalem.”

“He is.”

“To make a peace.”

“He’ll call it that.” The old man’s voice was very quiet. “Daniel calls it a covenant. ‘*And he shall confirm the covenant with many for one week.*’ Seven years.” He turned and looked at Ethan with those clear gray eyes. “When that covenant is signed, son, start counting. Because the clock the prophets wrote about will have started. And everything you’ve lived through this winter — the war, the famine, the plague, the betrayal — all of it will have been only the beginning of sorrows.”

Ethan felt the cold go through him, deeper than the February wind.

“It gets worse,” he said. It was not a question.

“It gets worse,” Elijah Cross agreed. “Much worse. Kane is a small man with a small kingdom. What’s coming is a man with the whole world. He’ll give your neighbors bread and peace and medicine, and they’ll love him for it. And then one day he’ll ask them for something in return. And those who won’t give it —” He stopped. “You’ll see. Rachel’s documents already told you. Registration first. Then the mark. Then the hunting.”

He was quiet for a long moment.

“You’ll need to be ready,” he said. “Not just with walls and rifles. Those won’t help you against what’s coming. You’ll need to be ready to leave, maybe. To hide. To worship in cellars and barns and caves, the way the early Church did under Rome. The way Tyler Kane’s little group does now under his father’s school.” He looked at Ethan. “Caleb Whitfield’s seventh notebook. The Church in the Catacombs. Read it. Teach it. Make sure every believer in this town knows it by heart.”

“And then?”

Elijah Cross smiled.

It was the first time Ethan had seen him smile — really smile — and it transformed his whole weathered face. The deep lines softened. The gray eyes lit up like winter sky when the sun breaks through.

“And then He comes,” the old man said. “In glory. On a white horse. With every one of them behind Him.” He nodded at the granite headstone. “Your wife. Your little girl. Hal Whitaker and Luis Ortega and Walt Kimble and Caleb Whitfield and every saint who ever lived. The sky’s going to split open like a curtain, and every eye’s going to see Him, and every knee’s going to bow — including the one in Jerusalem.” He looked out at the long rows of graves on the hill, and his voice dropped to almost a

whisper. “‘*And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.*’”

Ethan could not speak.

“That’s what you’re fighting for,” Elijah Cross said. “Not the town. Not the walls. Not even the people, though you love them. You’re fighting to stay faithful until He comes. That’s all. That’s everything.”

He stood up slowly, leaning on his walking staff.

“I’ve got to go soon,” he said.

Ethan looked up. “Go? Where?”

“Wherever He sends me.” The old man shrugged. “There’s a lot of towns out there, son. A lot of them are like yours was, before. Tired. Grieving. Forgetting.” He looked down at Ethan. “And a lot of them don’t have a Caleb Whitfield. Or a Rebecca. Or a boy in a bell tower.”

He laid his big, knuckled hand on Ethan’s head for a moment, the way a father blesses a son.

“‘*The LORD bless thee, and keep thee,*’” he said softly. “‘*The LORD make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: The LORD lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.*’”

Then he turned and walked slowly down the gravel lane from the cemetery toward the town, in the last red light of the setting sun, with his long dark coat moving in the wind.

* * *

The North Checkpoint, State Route 39

February 28 — 10:15 a.m.

The wagons from Pike’s Mill came the next morning.

There were eleven of them — flatbed farm wagons and hay wagons and one enormous old grain wagon with iron-rimmed wheels, drawn by teams of Belgians and Percherons and mules, coming down the long gravel lane from County Road 7 to the north gate of Ashwood in a slow procession. Bishop Jacob Brenneman rode in the lead buggy, his black hat pulled low, his white beard blowing in the wind.

The wagons were loaded with grain.

Wheat. Oats. Shelled corn. Barley. Sacks of it, hundreds of them, stacked six and eight high on every wagon bed. And crates of honey, and barrels of molasses, and bushel baskets of potatoes and turnips and winter squash from the Mennonite root cellars.

Ethan met the old bishop at the gate. So did Brooks, and Gary Voss on his crutches, and Samuel Graves.

“How?” Brooks said. He was staring at the wagons. “Jacob — how? Kane takes thirty percent of everything you grow. We’ve heard. Every month, his quartermaster comes and counts your stores —”

“He does,” Bishop Brenneman agreed calmly, climbing down stiffly from the buggy. “And he takes his thirty percent. We render unto Caesar.” A faint twinkle appeared in his pale blue eyes. “But Mr. Kane’s quartermaster is a city man from Columbus. He does not know how to count a Mennonite root cellar. And he does not know that our people have always tithed — a tenth of every harvest, set aside for the Lord’s work, in a separate granary on the far side of the mill pond, since my great-grandfather’s time.” He gestured at the wagons. “This is the Lord’s tithe. Three years of it. We have been saving it for a time of great need.” He looked at Brooks. “I believe this is that time.”

Brooks could not speak.

“There was an old man who came through Pike’s Mill,” the bishop went on, “about ten days ago. Tall. White hair. A long dark coat. He stayed one night in our meetinghouse. He preached to us — in English, which our people do not always welcome, but we listened.” He smiled faintly. “He told us about Ashwood. About the battle. About the hundred and fifty graves on the hill, and the food running out, and the seed corn in the cellar. And he read us a verse from Malachi. ‘*Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven.*’” He shrugged. “We are simple people. We took it as a word from the Lord.”

Gary Voss was staring at the wagons. Tears were running down his weathered face.

“How much?” he whispered.

“About four thousand bushels of grain,” the bishop said. “And what you see of the rest.”

Gary did the arithmetic in his head. Ethan watched him do it — the same way Hal had done it, a hundred times, standing in a stubble field in October.

“That gets us to planting,” Gary said hoarsely. “With the seed corn in Keller’s cellar — and the supply trucks we took from Kane — that gets us to April. To May, maybe. Past planting. Maybe all the way to the first harvest, if we’re careful.”

He turned to Ethan. His face was wet.

“Hal said it,” he said. “In the rail yard. Right before he — *Seedtime and harvest shall not cease*.” His voice broke. “He was right. He was *right.*”

* * *

First Baptist Church

March 2 — 5:45 a.m.

Elijah Cross was gone.

Nobody saw him leave. Noah Simmons had been on watch in the bell tower all night, and he swore afterward that no one had passed through any of the checkpoints on any of the roads, and that he had been watching the whole time. The volunteers at every gate said the same.

But when Rebecca Whitfield came into the sanctuary of First Baptist Church at a quarter to six in the morning to light the lamps for the dawn prayer meeting, the old man was not in the back pew where he had slept every night for ten days, wrapped in his long dark coat.

The pew was empty.

On it lay a single sheet of paper, folded once. And on top of the paper, very carefully placed, was a small, worn, black Bible, its cover held on to its spine with a strip of leather.

Rebecca picked up the paper with shaking hands and unfolded it.

It was written in pencil, in a big, plain, careful hand, like a man who had learned to write late in life and never quite gotten comfortable with it.

Rebecca —

I have to go. There are other towns. You know that.

Leave this Bible for whoever comes next. Somebody always does.

Tell Ethan: when the covenant is signed, start counting.

Tell Noah: the watchman's job is not to fight. It is to warn. He is doing it well.

Tell Rachel: keep writing it down. Every name.

Tell Russ Keller: feed the sheep.

And tell yourself this, every morning, when you open your father's Bible:

"*When these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh.*" *— Luke 21:28*

He is coming, Rebecca. Sooner than any of you think.

Stay faithful.

— E.C.

Rebecca sat down in the empty pew with the letter in one hand and the worn black Bible in the other.

Outside, the first gray light was coming up over the burned fields to the east. The bell in the tower above her began to ring for the dawn prayer meeting — Noah, pulling the rope, slow and steady.

And down the street, in the courthouse command center, the shortwave radio crackled to life on the walnut table, and the voice from Geneva came through the static, warm and calm and reassuring, as it always was.

"*…and so, my friends, the day is almost here. In one week, I will travel to Jerusalem, the holy city, the city of peace. There, for the first time in history, the leaders of Israel and her neighbors will sit at one table with the nations of the world. And together, we will sign a covenant of peace that will last for a generation…*"

Rebecca did not hear it.

She was sitting in the back pew of her father's church in the gray dawn, holding a stranger's Bible against her chest, with her eyes closed and her lips moving.

Lift up your heads. Lift up your heads.

For your redemption draweth nigh.

"*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers.*"

— Malachi 4:5–6

* * *

END OF CHAPTER 18

CHAPTER 19

Peace for the World

"*Because ye have said, We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us: for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves.*"

— Isaiah 28:15

* * *

Jerusalem

March 9 — 10:00 a.m. local time

Rabbi Eliezer Adler had prayed at the Western Wall every morning for fifty-one years.

He had prayed there in the heat of August and the rain of December. He had prayed there during two intifadas and four wars. He had prayed there on the morning after the vanishing, when half of the Christian pilgrims in the Old City had disappeared from their tour buses and their hotel rooms and the Via Dolorosa, and the city had been full of weeping and sirens and confusion. He had prayed there when the missiles fell on Tel Aviv, and when the missiles stopped.

He was eighty-three years old. He had seen everything.

He had never seen anything like this.

The plaza in front of the Wall was full. Not with worshippers. With people. A hundred thousand, maybe more, packed from the Wall to the Dung Gate, spilling up the stairs toward the Jewish Quarter, standing on every rooftop and every balcony and every ledge of the ancient stones. Israelis and Palestinians. Jews in black coats and Muslims in white robes and Christians — the ones who were left

— with crosses around their necks. Soldiers in olive drab, their rifles slung, standing side by side with men in kaffiyehs, not watching each other, watching the sky.

And above them, on the Temple Mount, on the great stone platform where Solomon's Temple had stood three thousand years ago, a white stage had been built in the shadow of the golden Dome of the Rock.

The helicopter came in low from the west at ten o'clock exactly, and the crowd began to roar.

Rabbi Adler did not roar. He stood at the edge of the plaza, apart from the crowd, with his prayer shawl over his shoulders and his worn book of Psalms in his hands, and watched the helicopter settle onto the Temple Mount beside the white stage.

He watched the man in the plain dark suit step out of it.

He watched him walk, unhurried, across the ancient stones of the Mount — the stones where Abraham had bound Isaac, where David had bought a threshing floor, where the Holy of Holies had stood — to the center of the white stage, and raise both hands.

And the hundred thousand people in the plaza below fell silent all at once, as though a switch had been thrown.

Rabbi Eliezer Adler closed his eyes.

He was thinking of a passage from the prophet Daniel that his own grandfather had made him memorize as a boy in Kraków, in 1949, before the family came to the Land. A passage his grandfather had said the rabbis argued about for two thousand years, and never agreed upon.

And he shall confirm the covenant with many for one week: and in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease.

The old rabbi's lips moved silently.

Master of the universe, he prayed. *Let me be wrong.*

* * *

Ashwood High School Gymnasium

March 9 — 4:00 a.m.

It was four o'clock in the morning in Ohio, and the gymnasium was full.

The roof over the stage had been patched with tarps and plywood since the shelling. The scoreboard, still frozen at **HOME 0 — GUEST 0,** had a crack running through it from a shell fragment. The cots of the clinic had been pushed back against the walls again, and Ed Marsh's forty-inch television — which had never gone back to the Marsh farm after the Night of Nations, and so was the only thing Ed owned that had not burned — sat on its folding table at center court, wired to the satellite dish on the roof.

Fifteen hundred people sat in the bleachers and on the floor in the dark, wrapped in blankets, watching the blue screen.

Ethan stood against the wall beside the stage with Sarah and Jack. Jack was on his feet now, against orders, with his side still bandaged. Rebecca stood on Ethan's other side with her father's Bible. Rachel beside her, with a notebook. Mercer. Samuel. Brooks and Ellen. Noah near the door.

At 4:02, the screen flickered, and Jerusalem appeared.

A murmur went through the gym. The white stage on the Temple Mount. The golden Dome, blazing in the morning sun. The vast crowd in the plaza below. The ancient walls of the Old City, pale gold against a brilliant blue sky.

And the man in the plain dark suit, standing alone in the center of the stage with his hands raised.

A caption scrolled across the bottom of the screen:

THE JERUSALEM SUMMIT — PEACE FOR THE WORLD

LIVE FROM THE HOLY CITY

* * *

"*Shalom,*" the man said. "*Salaam. Peace.*"

His voice filled the gymnasium — warm, calm, intimate, as it always was. On the screen, a hundred thousand people in the plaza below the Temple Mount were weeping.

"*Three thousand years ago, on this very spot, a king named Solomon built a house for God. He prayed that it would be a house of prayer for all nations. For three thousand years, men have fought over this ground. They have killed each other for it. They have burned it and rebuilt it and burned it again. More blood has been shed on this hill, in the name of God, than on any other place on earth.*"

He paused. The camera found his face — the dark eyes, full of sorrow.

"*Today, that ends.*"

The roar from the plaza was so loud that the speaker on the Ashwood television crackled and distorted.

He waited for it to fade. Then he began, calmly and clearly, to explain.

* * *

It took him forty minutes.

Ethan would remember it afterward as the most remarkable speech he had ever heard. Not because of anything the man said — though what he said was remarkable enough — but because of how he said it. Every word was clear. Every sentence was simple. Every promise was specific, and practical, and reasonable. He did not rant or shout or thunder. He simply laid it out, piece by piece, like an architect unrolling a blueprint, until the whole shape of a new world stood before them.

The Global Peace and Prosperity Initiative, he called it.

First, he said, *the Covenant of Jerusalem.* A binding treaty between the State of Israel and every one of her neighbors, guaranteed by the Council of Nations, for a period of seven years. Israel's borders would

be secured. Her enemies would disarm. And for the first time in two thousand years, the Temple Mount would be shared.

"*The Dome of the Rock will stand,*" he said, "*as it has stood for thirteen centuries. And beside it, on the northern side of this platform, where the scholars now tell us the ancient Holy of Holies once stood, the Jewish people will be permitted to rebuild their Temple. To restore their worship. To offer their prayers — and their sacrifices — as their fathers did.*"

In the gymnasium, Rebecca made a small sound, and her hand tightened on Ethan's arm.

On the screen, at the edge of the plaza, the camera found an old rabbi in a prayer shawl, standing apart from the crowd with his eyes closed and his face pale.

Second, the man said, *the World Food Authority.* Every warehouse of grain on earth, every harvest, every shipment, coordinated through a single body, so that no child anywhere would ever go hungry again. Distribution centers would open in every region by summer. North America first.

"*The people of the United States have suffered more than any people on earth,*" he said gently. "*They will be the first to be fed.*"

People in the bleachers were crying.

Third, economic recovery. The old currencies had collapsed. The dollar was worthless. The euro was trembling. So the Council would establish a single, universal unit of exchange — the Accord Credit — backed by the combined resources of every participating nation. It would be digital. It would be secure. It would be tied to each person's registration with the Council, so that it could never be stolen or counterfeited.

"*No more poverty,*" he said. "*No more inflation. No more banks collapsing and taking the savings of ordinary families with them. Every man and woman on earth, registered and recognized, with a secure account that belongs to them and them alone.*"

Rachel Monroe had stopped writing. Her pen was pressed against the page of her notebook so hard it had torn through the paper.

Fourth, disarmament. Every nuclear weapon on earth would be surrendered to the Council within a year. Every national army would be reduced to a defensive force. The age of war was over.

And fifth, he said — and here his voice softened, and he looked out over the crowd in the plaza with those dark, sorrowful eyes — *fifth, unity.*

"*For too long, the human family has been divided. By borders. By flags. By languages. By religions. Each of us clinging to our own small truth, and calling our neighbor's truth a lie. That is how wars begin. That is how children die.*"

"*I do not ask any of you to give up your faith. Keep it. Honor it. Pray to God as your fathers did. But I ask you to recognize, at last, that we are one family, under one heaven. That every faith is a path toward the same light. That the time has come to lay down the old claims of exclusive truth that have set brother against brother for so many thousands of years.*"

He lifted his hands.

"*On the twentieth of March — the first day of spring, the day of new beginnings — the leaders of the nations will gather here, in Jerusalem, on this holy mountain, to sign the Covenant and the Initiative into law. On that day, the old world will end. And a new world will begin.*"

"*Peace, my friends. Peace for Jerusalem. Peace for the nations. Peace for the world.*"

He lowered his hands.

And the plaza below the Temple Mount exploded.

* * *

On the screen, the camera pulled back and up, and up, until the whole Old City of Jerusalem lay spread out beneath it, golden in the morning sun — and every street and every rooftop and every square was full of people, dancing, weeping, embracing, waving flags of a dozen nations. The bells of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre were ringing. From the minarets of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the call to prayer was rising. At the Western Wall, men in black coats were dancing in a circle with their arms on each other's shoulders.

Then the screen cut away. To Rome, where a hundred thousand people filled St. Peter's Square beneath a gray sky, cheering. To Mecca, where pilgrims in white thronged the Grand Mosque. To London, to Moscow, to Beijing, to Lagos, to Rio, to Tokyo. Everywhere, crowds. Everywhere, weeping and dancing and singing. Fireworks exploding over Sydney Harbor in the night.

A caption scrolled across the bottom:

THE WORLD CELEBRATES — A NEW BEGINNING FOR HUMANITY

In the gymnasium of Ashwood High School, at 4:45 in the morning, people were clapping.

Not everyone. But many. More than on the Night of Nations, Ethan thought. He saw it happen — saw the clapping start in the bleachers and spread, the way a fire spreads in dry grass. He saw refugees from the Hollow on their feet, tears streaming down their faces. He saw farmers who had lost their barns to Kane's torches clapping slowly, their faces working. He saw a young mother holding up her baby toward the screen.

No child anywhere will ever go hungry again.

North America first.

And he saw, near the door, a man he recognized — Dennis Grubb, the hog farmer who had stood in the courthouse square nine days ago and handed a stolen ham back to Doc Lindquist with tears running down his face — standing and clapping with his hands above his head, and shouting something Ethan could not hear.

Ethan looked at Rebecca.

She was not clapping. She was standing perfectly still, with her father's Bible clutched against her chest and her face white as paper.

“The Temple,” she whispered. “Ethan, he’s going to let them rebuild the Temple.”

* * *

First Baptist Church — The Pastor’s Study

March 9 — 7:30 a.m.

Tape Thirty-One was called *The Third Temple.*

Rebecca had never played it for the town. It was one of the tapes about prophecy — the ones with charts and dates and long passages from Daniel and Ezekiel and Revelation — and she had held them back, all winter, because the town had needed the others more. The gospel. The comfort. The tapes about grief and courage and how to survive.

Now she sat on the floor of her father’s study at seven-thirty in the morning with the footlocker open beside her, and slid Tape Thirty-One into the cassette player, and pressed the button.

Around her, crowded into the small study, were the people who had stood beside her through the long winter. Ethan. Sarah. Samuel. Rachel. Mercer. Noah. Jack, sitting in her father’s leather chair with his hand pressed against his bandaged side. Brooks and Ellen, in the doorway.

The speaker hissed. A pigeon cooed faintly. Then the voice.

“*There’s a thing that has to happen before the Lord comes back in glory. Most people don’t know about it. Most preachers don’t talk about it. But it’s right there in the Bible, plain as day, in three different books.*”

“*The Temple has to be rebuilt.*”

Rebecca closed her eyes.

“*Daniel nine says the coming prince will make a covenant with many for seven years, and in the middle of it — three and a half years in — he’ll cause the sacrifice and the offering to cease. Well, you can’t stop sacrifices unless somebody’s making them. And you can’t make them unless there’s a Temple.*”

“*Paul says the same thing in Second Thessalonians two. The man of sin ‘as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.’ Jesus says it in Matthew twenty-four — ‘When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place.’ And John sees it in Revelation eleven — he’s told to measure the temple of God and the altar.*”

“*So here’s what I believe, as best I understand the Word. After the Church is caught up, there’s going to be a man who makes peace. A peace nobody else could make. A peace between Israel and her enemies. And part of that peace — maybe the heart of it — is going to be that the Jewish people finally get to rebuild their Temple on the mountain in Jerusalem. And the world’s going to celebrate. They’re going to say it’s the greatest peace treaty in history.*”

A pause on the tape. The rustle of pages.

“*And it’ll be a covenant with death.*”

“*Isaiah twenty-eight. ‘We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement.’ And then, three verses later: ‘Your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with hell shall not stand.’*”

“*If you’re listening to this, and you see it happen — if you see a man stand up in Jerusalem and promise the world peace, and promise Israel her Temple — then you’ll know. The clock has started. Seven years. And in the middle of those seven years, he’ll walk into that Temple and declare himself God. And that’s when the real persecution begins.*”

“*Don’t be afraid. The Lord told you ahead of time so you wouldn’t be. But be ready. Be ready to stand. Be ready to hide. Be ready to refuse his mark, no matter what it costs you. Be ready to die, if it comes to that.*”

“*And lift up your heads. Because every day of that seven years is one day closer to the moment when the sky splits open and the King comes home.*”

The tape clicked.

Nobody in the study spoke.

After a long time, Rachel Monroe reached into her satchel and pulled out a single page of the Framework. She unfolded it and laid it on the floor in the center of the room, where everyone could see.

At the top, it read: **APPENDIX H — RELIGIOUS ACCOMMODATION AND THE JERUSALEM QUESTION.**

“I never understood this one,” she said quietly. “It’s the shortest appendix. Two pages.” She put her finger on a paragraph halfway down and read aloud.

“*The resolution of the Jerusalem question is essential to the legitimacy of the unified framework. The Facilitator should be prepared to offer the Jewish faction the restoration of Temple worship on the northern portion of the Haram al-Sharif, in exchange for Israeli acceptance of the Covenant. This concession will be temporary. Once the framework is consolidated, Temple worship will be suspended in the interest of universal religious harmony.*”

She looked up.

“*Temporary,*” she said. “*Suspended.* In the middle.” Her voice was barely a whisper. “They planned to stop the sacrifices before they ever let them start.”

Samuel Graves let out a long, slow breath.

“‘*And in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease,*’” he said softly. “Eleven weeks before the vanishing. And two thousand five hundred years before that.”

* * *

Iron Ridge — The Manager’s House

March 10 — 9:15 p.m.

Marcus Kane had watched the Jerusalem Summit alone.

He had watched it on the sixty-inch screen in his study, propped up in the leather chair with his right arm in a sling and a bottle of bourbon on the desk that he had not opened. He had watched the man in the plain dark suit stand on the Temple Mount and promise the world peace. He had watched the crowds in a hundred cities dance.

He had not felt anything. That was the strange thing. He had expected to feel admiration, the way he had in December. Or envy. Or even fear.

Instead he had felt only tired.

Now, the evening of the next day, Julian Sorensen sat across the desk from him in the lamplight, in his charcoal overcoat, with his black briefcase open on his knees.

Sorensen had arrived by helicopter an hour ago. He had not brought coffee this time.

“I’ll be brief, Colonel,” he said. “I have a great deal to do before the twentieth.” He took a single sheet of paper from the briefcase and laid it on the desk. “The Office has reviewed the situation in North-Central Ohio. Your operation against Ashwood was — unsuccessful.”

Marcus said nothing.

“You lost a hundred and fifty men. A hundred and twelve surrendered. Your reserves were routed by — I’m told — a mob of refugees with farm implements. You yourself were wounded. And Ashwood remains independent.” Sorensen’s voice was mild, almost apologetic. “The Chairman was disappointed. He had hoped North America would be tidy before Jerusalem.”

“I know what happened,” Marcus said. “I was there.”

“Of course.” Sorensen tapped the paper. “The Office has decided that your charter as Regional Coordinating Authority will be placed under review. Effective immediately. Relief shipments to the Iron Alliance will continue, but they will be administered directly by Office personnel rather than through your command.” He paused. “You’ll retain authority over Iron Ridge itself, of course. For now.”

Marcus looked at the paper. At the gold seal in the corner.

“You’re cutting me out,” he said.

“We’re restructuring.”

“You’re cutting me out.” Marcus looked up at him. “Because I lost.”

Sorensen smiled faintly. “The Chairman has no use for men who lose, Colonel. Surely you understand that. You were very clear about it yourself, in December. *I am not a cruel man, but I will do whatever is necessary*.” He closed the briefcase. “So will we.”

He stood.

“Where are you going?” Marcus asked.

Sorensen paused at the door.

“Ashwood,” he said. “Tomorrow morning. The Office would like to speak with them directly. They’ve shown remarkable resilience. Remarkable organization.” He smiled. “The Chairman admires resilience. He’d like to see whether it can be put to better use.”

He went out.

Marcus Kane sat alone in the lamplight for a long time, looking at the sheet of paper with the gold seal on it.

Then he heard the door creak behind him. He did not turn.

“Dad?”

“Come in, Tyler.”

The boy came in and sat on the leather couch by the cold fireplace, the way he had in November. He had his mother’s Bible in his lap. He did not open it.

“Was that the man from the Office?” Tyler asked.

“Yes.”

“What did he want?”

Marcus was quiet for a long moment.

“He wanted me to know I don’t matter anymore,” he said.

Tyler looked at him.

“They’re going to Ashwood,” Marcus said. “Tomorrow. They’re going to offer Walker what they offered me. The charter. The relief. The seat at the table.” He laughed — a short, bitter, exhausted sound. “And when Walker’s done what they need, they’ll cut him out too. Or worse.” He shook his head. “That’s what they do. That’s what they’ve always done. I just didn’t see it.”

“Walker won’t take it,” Tyler said quietly.

Marcus turned and looked at his son.

“How do you know?”

“Because he already said no,” Tyler said. “To you. In the square. When he had every reason to say yes.” He looked down at his mother’s Bible. “People like that don’t change their minds because a man in a nice coat asks nicely.”

Marcus Kane stared at his son for a long time in the lamplight.

Then he looked away.

“Read me something,” he said roughly. “From her Bible. Anything.”

Tyler opened it. He turned the pages slowly. Then he stopped, and read aloud, in his cracking fourteen-year-old voice:

“‘*Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish. Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the LORD his God.*’”

Marcus did not say anything.

But he did not tell his son to stop.

* * *

The Courthouse Square — Ashwood

March 11 — 10:00 a.m.

The helicopter landed in the square.

It came in low over the rooftops from the southwest — the sleek gray aircraft with no markings — and circled once over the courthouse, and settled onto the frozen lawn beside the crater where the bandstand had been, its rotors blowing snow and ash and scraps of paper across the square in a whirlwind.

Every rifle in the inner ring was pointed at it.

Jack Reynolds stood at the top of the courthouse steps with his side bandaged and his radio in his hand, and said quietly, “*Hold. Nobody fires unless I say.*”

The rotors spun down. The side door slid open.

Julian Sorensen stepped out onto the frozen lawn in his charcoal overcoat and his gray scarf and his polished shoes, carrying his black briefcase, and looked around the ruined square with an expression of polite, sympathetic interest — at the crater, at the bent flagpole with its tattered flag, at the boarded windows of the courthouse, at the cardboard box of photographs that still sat on the courthouse steps.

Then he looked up at the rifles.

“Good morning,” he called. “My name is Julian Sorensen. I’m the Regional Facilitator for North America, International Relief Coordination Office.” He smiled. “I’m unarmed. And I’ve come a long way. May I speak with Mayor Brooks?”

* * *

They met him in the commissioners’ chamber, around the long walnut table beneath the boarded windows and the big county map with its rash of red pins.

Brooks sat at the head. Ethan and Jack on either side. Rebecca, Samuel, Mercer, Sarah, Gary Voss in Hal’s chair. And at the far end of the table, with her satchel on her lap and her face very still, Rachel Monroe.

Sorensen noticed her at once. Ethan saw it — the slight flicker in the pale eyes, the fractional pause before he sat down. Then it was gone, and he was smiling pleasantly again, and opening his briefcase.

“I’ll be direct, Mayor,” he said, “because I respect you, and because I have a great many stops to make before the twentieth.” He withdrew a sheet of thick cream-colored paper and laid it on the walnut table. In the upper corner, embossed in gold, was the seal. “This is a charter. It designates the holder as the Regional Coordinating Authority for North-Central Ohio. Seven counties. A hundred and forty thousand people. Priority access to every relief shipment from the World Food Authority, beginning in May. Food, fuel, medicine, communications. A seat at the table of the Council of Nations when North America is formally integrated.”

He slid it across the table toward Brooks.

“It was Marcus Kane’s,” he said. “It’s yours now. If you want it.”

The room went absolutely silent.

“You’re offering me *Kane’s charter*,” Brooks said slowly.

“I’m offering you what Kane couldn’t hold.” Sorensen folded his hands. “The Office has watched Ashwood all winter, Mayor. You’ve shown remarkable courage. Remarkable organization. You held off an army three times your size. You fed a thousand refugees. You kept your people together through famine and plague and war. That’s exactly the kind of leadership the new world needs.” He leaned forward slightly. “The Chairman himself asked me to make this offer. He admires you. All of you.”

“And Kane?” Jack asked.

“Mr. Kane’s charter has been placed under review.” Sorensen’s smile did not change. “He’ll retain authority over Iron Ridge, for the time being. But the Alliance towns — Millbrook, Harlan’s Crossing, Carverton, the rest — would come under Ashwood’s coordination. Mr. Kane would answer to *you*, Mayor.”

Ethan felt something cold settle in his stomach.

He looked at Brooks. The mayor was staring at the charter on the table. His face was very pale.

“And in return?” Brooks asked quietly.

“Very little.” Sorensen spread his hands. “Registration of your residents, using the Office’s forms, before the Initiative takes effect. Cooperation with the World Food Authority’s distribution protocols. Participation in the Accord Credit system when it launches in the fall.” He paused. “And a modest adjustment to the — religious materials — currently circulating in your region. The recordings. The prophecy tapes. They’ve caused a great deal of unnecessary fear. The Office would ask that they be retired.” He smiled gently. “In the spirit of the Initiative. Unity. Harmony. I’m sure you understand.”

Nobody spoke.

“Think about it, Mayor,” Sorensen said softly. “Think about what you could do. Your wife’s insulin — unlimited. Your farms replanted with seed from every granary on earth. Your people fed, and warm, and safe, for the first time in a year. Your children with a future.” He tapped the charter. “And seven counties that would finally be governed by a decent man, instead of a warlord. Isn’t that what you’ve wanted all along? To protect people? This is how you do it. At scale.”

Daniel Brooks looked at the charter for a long, long time.

Ethan watched him. He watched the mayor's hands, folded on the walnut table, and saw them tremble very slightly. He watched his eyes move — to the charter, and then to the doorway, where Ellen was standing with her hands clasped in front of her, and then back to the charter.

He thought about Ellen's insulin. Twelve vials, stolen from a crate in December. Enough to April, Sarah had said. Maybe.

He thought about what he would do, if it were Emily.

Then Daniel Brooks took off his wire-rimmed glasses, and set them down on the walnut table, very carefully, beside the charter.

"Mr. Sorensen," he said. "Do you know what I did for thirty years, before I was mayor?"

Sorensen tilted his head politely. "I believe you sold automobiles."

"Fords." Brooks nodded. "At the dealership on Route 42. And I'll tell you what I learned in thirty years of selling cars." He looked up. "When a man offers you a deal that's too good to be true, it's because he's already figured out what you're going to pay for it. And he knows you won't like it."

Sorensen's smile did not change. But something behind his eyes went very still.

"You're not offering me a charter," Brooks said. "You're offering me Kane's *job.* Kane's towns. Kane's prisoners in Kane's quarry, probably, once I've got enough of them. And in a year, or two, or three, when I've registered a hundred and forty thousand people and silenced every preacher in seven counties and put every one of them on your Accord Credit — you'll come back to Ashwood in your helicopter with another piece of paper, and hand it to whoever's next." He shook his head slowly. "And I'll be sitting where Kane's sitting tonight. Wondering how I didn't see it."

The room was absolutely silent.

"We voted, Mr. Sorensen," Brooks said. "In November. Six thousand people stood in line in the cold, and we voted not to put our names in your book. And then nine hundred men came to make us, and ninety of our people died saying no." His voice cracked slightly. "I'm not going to spit on their graves for a seat at your table."

He picked up the charter and held it out across the walnut table.

"No, thank you," said Mayor Daniel Brooks.

* * *

Sorensen did not take the charter at once.

He looked at it, in Brooks's outstretched hand, for a long moment. Then he looked around the table — at Ethan, at Jack, at Rebecca with her father's Bible, at Samuel with his hands folded on his cane.

And then his pale eyes came to rest on Rachel Monroe.

"Ms. Monroe," he said pleasantly. "I wondered if I'd find you here."

Rachel did not move.

“We’ve been looking for you since April,” Sorensen said. “Howard Birch was a friend of mine, you know. We worked together for three years on the Ohio implementation. I was very sorry to hear he’d died.” He tilted his head. “I was even sorrier to learn he’d given you something before he did.”

“He gave me the truth,” Rachel said. Her voice was steady.

“He gave you a draft.” Sorensen shrugged slightly. “An old working document. Draft Seven. We’re on Draft Nineteen now.” He smiled. “Much has changed.”

“Not the parts that matter.” Rachel opened her satchel and drew out the single page — *Appendix H* — and laid it on the table in front of him. “*Temple worship will be suspended in the interest of universal religious harmony.*” She looked at him. “Has that changed?”

Sorensen looked down at the page for a long moment.

Then he laughed. Softly. Genuinely, as if she had told a charming joke.

“Ms. Monroe,” he said gently. “You still think it matters.”

Rachel stared at him.

“You’ve carried those papers for eleven months,” Sorensen said. “Through fire and famine and war. You’ve shown them to — how many people? Fifty? A hundred?” He shook his head, almost kindly. “And in nine days, the leaders of every nation on earth will stand on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and sign the greatest peace treaty in human history. And four billion people will watch it. And weep. And dance in the streets.” He spread his hands. “Do you really think any of them will care about an appendix?”

He picked up his briefcase.

“Documents don’t matter anymore, Ms. Monroe. Truth doesn’t matter. Not the way you mean it. The world has been frightened for eleven months. It’s hungry, and grieving, and tired. And now someone has come along to make the fear go away.” He smiled. “They’ll believe whatever lets them keep that feeling. You could stand on the Temple Mount yourself on the twentieth with every page of your Framework, and they’d tear you to pieces for trying to take their peace away.”

He stood up.

“You’re welcome to your papers,” he said. “Keep them. Read them to your friends. Put them in a museum, someday, if there are any museums.” He glanced at Rebecca. “Along with the tapes.”

Nobody spoke.

Sorensen took the charter from Brooks’s still-outstretched hand, folded it neatly, and placed it back in his briefcase. Then he walked to the door of the commissioners’ chamber, and paused there, and looked back at them.

“The Chairman asked me to give you a message,” he said. “If you refused.” His voice was pleasant, and mild, and utterly cold. “He said: *The door is open. It will not be open forever.*”

He went out.

A few minutes later, they heard the helicopter's rotors begin to turn, and then the thudding roar as it lifted off from the courthouse lawn and swung away to the southwest, over the rooftops, and was gone.

* * *

In the silence afterward, Ellen Brooks walked across the commissioners' chamber from the doorway, and put her arms around her husband from behind, and pressed her face against the top of his head.

Daniel Brooks sat very still at the head of the walnut table.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "Ellie, I'm sorry. The insulin —"

"Hush," Ellen said. "Hush, Danny." She held him tighter. "'*My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.*' Philippians four." She kissed the top of his head. "He's done it every day since November. He'll do it tomorrow."

Across the table, Samuel Graves cleared his throat.

"Seems to me," the old farmer said slowly, "that man in the nice coat made one mistake."

Everyone turned to look at him.

"He said the truth doesn't matter anymore." Samuel folded his gnarled hands on the head of his cane. "He's wrong about that. The truth's the only thing that ever *has* mattered. It's just that most folks don't find out until it's too late." He looked at Rachel. "You keep those papers, young lady. Every page. And you keep writing it all down." He looked at Rebecca. "And you keep playing those tapes." He looked around the table. "Because someday — maybe not in nine days, maybe not in seven years — every one of those four billion people dancing in the streets is going to wake up and realize what they signed. And when they do, somebody needs to be standing there with the truth in their hands. Ready to tell them there's still a way home."

* * *

The Courthouse Roof

March 12 — 11:40 p.m.

The celebrations went on for three days.

Ethan listened to them on the shortwave radio on the courthouse roof, alone, in the cold, on the third night. He turned the dial slowly through the bands, and everywhere he turned, there was music and cheering and the sound of people weeping for joy.

A broadcast from London, where a million people had filled Trafalgar Square and the Mall all the way to Buckingham Palace. A broadcast from Paris, where fireworks were bursting over the Eiffel Tower every night. A broadcast from Cairo, where Muslims and Coptic Christians were dancing together in Tahrir Square. From Moscow. From Delhi. From Buenos Aires. From a refugee camp in Kenya, where a reporter's voice cracked as she described children singing a song they had made up about *the Peacemaker who will bring us bread.*

And from Jerusalem, where a choir of ten thousand voices — Jewish, Muslim, Christian, all together — was singing on the steps below the Temple Mount, in Hebrew and Arabic and English, a song that the announcer said had been written for the occasion. A song called *One Family.*

Ethan listened to it for a long time.

It was beautiful. That was the worst of it. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever heard.

Then he turned the dial one more time, to the local frequency that Mercer monitored — and heard the sound of celebrations there, too. In Millbrook. In Carverton. In Harlan's Crossing. In Mansfield. The towns of the Iron Alliance, and the towns beyond them. People shouting and laughing and singing on the radio, passing the microphone around, telling each other about the World Food Authority and the distribution centers opening in May and the Accord Credit and the new world that was coming.

And in Ashwood, silence.

He switched off the radio and stood at the parapet and looked out at the dark town below him.

Three hundred and eleven people had left Ashwood since the Jerusalem broadcast. Rachel had counted them. Families mostly — packing their wagons and their carts and walking north up Route 39 toward Millbrook, where the Office had opened a registration center in the old fire hall and was handing out ration cards to anyone who signed. Dennis Grubb had been one of them. He had come to the courthouse on the morning of the tenth, red-faced and ashamed, and told Ethan that he was sorry, that he believed in Jesus, that he meant everything he had said in the square — but that his wife was sick, and his grandkids were hungry, and the man on the radio had promised bread, and he didn't see what a form could hurt.

Ethan had not argued with him. He had shaken his hand and said, *God go with you, Dennis.* And watched him go.

Three hundred and eleven.

Out of nine thousand.

It was not many. Brooks had said so. Most of the town was staying. Most of the town had been through too much, and seen too much, and knelt in the snow too many times, to trade it now for a ration card.

But Ethan knew it was only the beginning.

He heard the hatch creak open behind him. He did not turn. He knew the footsteps.

Rebecca came and stood beside him at the parapet. She had her father's Bible, as always. For a long time, she did not say anything.

"Nine days," she said finally.

"Nine days."

"Elijah said to start counting." She looked out at the dark. "When it's signed."

"I know."

“Seven years, Ethan.” Her voice was barely a whisper. “Seven years of this. And it gets worse. Dad’s tapes say it gets so much worse.”

Ethan did not answer.

Far to the east, beyond the burned fields and the dark hardwood forests, beyond the ocean, on a golden mountain in a golden city, ten thousand voices were singing about one family under one heaven. And the whole world was listening, and weeping, and believing.

Rebecca opened her father’s Bible, by the faint light of the stars, to a page in the book of Isaiah that she had found that afternoon. In the margin, in faded blue ink, in her father’s cramped handwriting, were four words:

They will call it peace.

She read the verse aloud, softly, into the cold dark air.

“*Therefore hear the word of the LORD, ye scornful men, that rule this people which is in Jerusalem… Your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with hell shall not stand; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then ye shall be trodden down by it.*”

— Isaiah 28:14, 18

* * *

END OF CHAPTER 19

CHAPTER 20

The Breaking of America

“*And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet.*”

— Matthew 24:6

* * *

Whitaker Farm — Two Miles East of Ashwood

March 13 — 6:30 a.m.

The thaw came in the night.

Ethan heard it before he saw it — lying awake on the cot in Pastor Whitfield’s study, where he had slept since his house burned, listening to the steady drip of water from the eaves of First Baptist Church. By dawn the drip had become a trickle, and the trickle a rush, and when he walked out onto the church steps in the gray light, the whole town was running with water. Snowmelt pouring off the rooftops. Rivulets racing down the gutters of Main Street. The crater in the courthouse lawn filling slowly with brown water, like a pond.

And the air smelled different. Wet earth. Mud. Something green, somewhere, underneath it all.

Spring.

He walked out to the Whitaker farm that morning, two miles east of town, through fields that were turning from white to brown before his eyes. The snow was going everywhere at once — shrinking back from the fence lines, pulling away from the tree trunks, sinking into the black soil in dark wet patches. Crows were walking in the stubble. A pair of redwing blackbirds sat on a fence post, calling.

Gary Voss was in Hal's north field with a team of Belgians and a walking plow.

It was an old plow. Older than Gary — a single-bottom moldboard with wooden handles worn smooth by three generations of Whitaker hands, pulled out of the back of the bank barn where Hal's grandfather had left it in 1946, when the family bought its first tractor. Gary had spent a week cleaning the rust off it and sharpening the share. Now he stood at the end of the first furrow with the reins over his shoulders and the handles in his fists, and his wounded leg in a brace, and looked out across the two hundred acres of stubble that Hal Whitaker had farmed for fifty years.

"Ground's too wet," he said, when Ethan came up beside him. "Won't be dry enough to plant for three weeks, maybe four. But I wanted to open it up. Let the sun at it." He was quiet for a moment. "Hal always turned the first furrow on the thirteenth of March. Every year. He said his granddaddy did it on the thirteenth, and his granddaddy's granddaddy. Said it was bad luck to start any earlier or any later." He almost smiled. "I don't believe in luck. But I figured I'd do it anyway."

He clucked to the Belgians. They leaned into their collars. The old plow bit into the wet black earth, and turned it over in a long, shining, curling ribbon, and the smell of it rose up — rich and dark and alive.

Gary walked behind the plow to the end of the row. Then he stopped, and turned the team, and looked back at the single dark furrow running straight across the brown stubble field.

"'*While the earth remaineth,*'" he said hoarsely, "'*seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.*'"

He wiped his eyes with the back of his glove.

"Nine hundred bushels of seed corn," he said. "Two hundred acres. And four thousand bushels of the Mennonites' grain to get us there." He looked at Ethan. "We're going to make it, Ethan. To harvest. We're actually going to make it."

Ethan looked at the furrow — one straight dark line across a burned and broken field, the first mark of a new season.

"Hal would be proud," he said.

"Hal would say I'm plowing too shallow," Gary said. And then he laughed — the first real laugh Ethan had heard from him since the battle — and clucked to the Belgians, and turned the next furrow.

* * *

The Courthouse Command Center

March 14 — 10:00 a.m.

Daniel Mercer had been gone for four days.

He had ridden out on the tenth, on a borrowed horse with his arm finally out of its sling, heading north and west toward the old interstate. He had said only that he needed to see some things for himself, and talk to some people he knew, and listen to some radio frequencies he could not pick up from the courthouse roof. He had come back late on the night of the thirteenth, muddy and exhausted and silent, and gone straight to the commissioners' chamber, and spent the rest of the night bent over the big county map on the east wall with a box of colored grease pencils.

Now, at ten o'clock in the morning, he stood beside it and waited for the council to finish filing in.

The map was not a county map anymore.

He had taped four more sheets of paper to it — above, below, and on either side — and drawn on them in pencil the rough outline of the whole eastern half of what had once been the United States. And then he had colored it in.

Nobody said anything for a long time.

"I want you to see it," Mercer said finally. "All of it. I've been putting it together since November — from the shortwave, from the refugees, from people I know who are still out there listening. I rode to a ham radio operator in Wooster this week who's been talking to people in forty states since April." He picked up a grease pencil. "I think this is as accurate as anybody's going to get."

He began to point.

"Ohio River Republic. Cincinnati to Louisville to Evansville. Six counties in October. Twenty now. Standing army of four thousand. Registered with the Office in January." He moved his finger. "The Great Lakes Compact. Cleveland — what's left of it — Toledo, Detroit's suburbs, Erie. Coalition of city councils and National Guard commanders. Registered in February." He moved again. "Kane's Iron Alliance, you know. Now under direct Office administration, since Jerusalem."

He moved north and east.

"Pennsylvania's three pieces. The Appalachian counties are under something called the Mountain Covenant — a coalition of sheriffs and churches that won't register. They're holding out. For now." He tapped another area. "West Virginia's the same. So is eastern Kentucky. Hill country. Hard to govern. Easy to hide in." He paused. "Those are the places the Office is going to go after next."

He moved his hand south.

"Texas declared itself a sovereign republic in June. Everything west of the Sabine. They've got the remains of three Army divisions and most of Fort Hood, and they're not registering for anybody. The Deep South — Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia — is a patchwork. Some counties registered. Some didn't. There's fighting between them." He moved west, onto the blank edge of his map. "Colorado. The Rocky Mountain Federation. That's where the Provisional Government ended up. Whatever was left of Congress and the Cabinet. They've been in Cheyenne Mountain since April."

“The government,” Brooks said slowly. “There’s still a government?”

“There was,” Mercer said.

He set down the grease pencil and picked up a sheet of paper from the table — a transcript, in his own neat handwriting, of something he had heard on the radio in Wooster.

“Four days ago,” he said, “the Provisional Government of the United States issued a declaration from Cheyenne Mountain. I heard it rebroadcast in Wooster. The operator recorded it.” He looked down at the paper. “I’ll read you the part that matters.”

He read in a flat, careful voice.

“*…Recognizing that the federal government is no longer able to exercise effective authority over the territory of the United States, and recognizing the extraordinary humanitarian crisis facing the American people, the Provisional Government hereby accepts the invitation of the Council of Nations to participate in the Global Peace and Prosperity Initiative. Upon the signing of the Covenant of Jerusalem on March 20, the Provisional Government will transfer its remaining authority to the North American Administrative Region of the Council, and will be dissolved. The Constitution of the United States is hereby suspended pending the adoption of a new framework of governance consistent with the Initiative…*”

He lowered the paper.

“*Suspended,*” Rebecca whispered.

“Suspended,” Mercer said. “The last man with any claim to being President of the United States signed it. I won’t say his name. I don’t think it matters anymore.” He looked around the table. “In six days, when the Covenant is signed in Jerusalem, the United States of America will formally cease to exist. Not destroyed. Not conquered. *Dissolved.* By its own government. Into a region of somebody else’s.”

Nobody moved.

Ethan looked at the map. At the patchwork of colors spreading across what had been a nation — republics and compacts and covenants and alliances and federations, and the blank spaces in between where no one ruled at all. At the small dot in the middle of north-central Ohio, circled in green, that was Ashwood.

He thought of the flag on the bent pole in the courthouse square, torn and faded and shredded at the bottom edge. He thought of Noah and his youth group raising it every morning and lowering it every night for eleven months. He thought of Jack Reynolds on the courthouse roof in October, saying *Twenty-two years I wore that flag on my shoulder.*

“It’s been gone for months,” Jack said quietly. He was standing by the window, his side still bandaged under his shirt. “Since the first night. Since the bombs. We just kept pretending.”

“I know,” Brooks said. “But there’s a difference between knowing a thing and hearing it said out loud.”

Ethan remembered him saying that. On the courthouse steps, in October, on the morning after the last broadcast. It seemed like a hundred years ago.

“What happens to us?” Sarah asked. “When it’s signed. When the — Administrative Region — takes over.”

Mercer looked at the green circle on the map.

“Nothing, at first,” he said. “They’ve got bigger fish. Texas. The Mountain Covenant. Places with armies.” He paused. “But they’ll come. Sorensen told us. *The door will not be open forever*.” He set the grease pencil down on the walnut table. “We’re not a town in the United States anymore. We’re a town in the North American Administrative Region of the Council of Nations that has refused to register. That’s what we are now. That’s *all* we are.”

He looked around the table.

“We’re outlaws,” he said.

* * *

First Baptist Church — The Sanctuary

March 16 — 2:00 p.m.

They tried Russ Keller on a Monday afternoon, in the sanctuary of First Baptist Church, because it was the only building left in Ashwood big enough to hold the town.

It was not a real trial. There was no judge, no jury box, no court reporter. There was no law — not anymore — except the law they chose to keep. But Mayor Brooks had promised, in the commissioners’ chamber on the morning of February seventh, that Russ Keller would stand trial in the open, in front of the whole town, and the town would decide what to do with him.

So they did.

Keller sat in a folding chair at the front of the sanctuary, below the pulpit, facing the pews. He wore a clean white shirt that Jenna had ironed for him. His hands were folded in his lap. He had lost thirty pounds in the holding room. His heavy face was gray and lined and very still.

Behind him, in the front pew, sat his daughter and his three grandchildren, and his wife, who had not visited him once in the cell, and had come today.

The sanctuary was full. The balcony was full. People stood in the aisles and the foyer and outside on the lawn beneath the open windows.

Mayor Brooks presided. He stood at the pulpit — not preaching, just standing — with a sheet of paper in his hands. On it were the charges. Rachel had written them, carefully, from the legal pad pages in Jenna’s box.

He read them aloud.

He read every one. The roadblocks. The towers. The bunkers. The gap in the barricade on Township Fourteen. The ammunition stores. The grain on every farm in the outer ring. The hay barn on the Graves farm, where fifty-one refugees had been sleeping. The house on Maple Avenue where the orphans from Mansfield slept. The rooms where Ethan and Jack and Brooks himself slept.

The sanctuary was utterly silent while he read.

When he finished, he set the paper down and looked at Russ Keller.

“Russ,” he said. “Is it true?”

Keller lifted his head.

“All of it,” he said. His voice was hoarse but clear. “Every word. I wrote it all down, and I put it in the jar, and Kane used it.” He looked out at the pews. “Ninety people died on this town’s side. More on theirs. I don’t know how many of them are because of me. I’ll never know.” His voice cracked. “I’m not going to make excuses. I had reasons. I thought they were good reasons. They weren’t. I was afraid, and I trusted a wicked man instead of trusting God, and people died because of it.” He swallowed. “Whatever you decide, I’ll accept it. I deserve whatever you decide.”

He folded his hands again and bowed his head.

Brooks looked out at the sanctuary.

“Does anyone wish to speak?” he asked.

* * *

For a long moment, no one moved.

Then Linda Marsh stood up in the fourth pew.

She was a small, gray-haired woman in a black cardigan. Her husband had been shot dead on his own front porch on the night of February eighth, ringing the dinner bell. Everyone in the sanctuary knew it.

“My Ed’s in the ground because of that list,” she said. Her voice was very quiet. “Russ wrote down our corn crib. The Marsh farm, four thousand bushels. They came straight to it.” She looked at Keller. “I’ve prayed every night for six weeks to forgive you, Russ. Every night. I haven’t been able to do it yet.” She paused. “I’m going to keep praying.”

She sat down.

Then Samuel Graves stood, leaning on his cane. His hands were still scarred from the padlock on the burning barn.

“He wrote down my barn,” the old man said. “Fifty-one people sleeping in it. Somebody brought a chain.” He looked at Keller for a long moment. “I’ve thought a lot about that chain. About whether Russ knew. Whether he could’ve guessed.” He shook his head slowly. “I don’t think he did. I think he was a frightened man writing things down, and a wicked man took what he wrote and did something worse with it than he ever imagined.” He paused. “That doesn’t make him innocent. But it makes him something other than Kane.”

He sat down.

Then — slowly, on his crutches, with his wounded leg in its brace — Gary Voss got up from the pew where he had been sitting with Kyle and Maggie and the baby, and made his way down the center aisle to the front of the sanctuary.

The whole church watched him come.

He stopped beside Russ Keller's chair. He stood there for a long moment, looking down at the heavy gray-faced man who had given away Hal Whitaker's farm.

"Three weeks ago," Gary said, "I stood in the courthouse square and told the whole town I wanted him to hang." His voice was rough. "I meant it. I lay awake every night thinking about it. Hal was my best friend for forty years. Hal died in the rail yard with my hands on his chest, saying *plant it in April.*" He swallowed hard. "And Russ Keller gave Kane the map that brought those men to the rail yard."

The sanctuary was absolutely silent.

"But Russ Keller also gave us the seed corn," Gary said. "Nine hundred bushels. That he hid from everybody. That he could've kept for himself, and nobody would've ever known." He looked out at the pews. "Hal died defending that seed corn. And I turned the first furrow in Hal's north field three days ago. And in April, I'm going to plant it. And in July, God willing, this whole town's going to eat from it." His voice broke. "That's Russ's corn. That's Hal's field. I can't separate them anymore. I've tried. I can't."

He put one hand on Keller's shoulder.

"That old preacher in the square told me to start forgiving today," Gary said. "Seventy times seven. So I'm starting." He looked down at Keller. "I don't want him to hang. I want him to work. I want him in Hal's field, next to me, every day, from April till harvest. Planting Hal's corn. Hoeing it. Picking it. And then I want him to take it to the Hollow and the camp and the widows, and feed them. Every bushel." He looked up at Brooks. "That's what I want. For as long as he lives."

He stood there beside the chair with his hand on Russ Keller's shoulder.

And Russ Keller put his face in his hands, and wept.

* * *

The town voted by show of hands. It did not take long.

Russ Keller was found guilty of betraying the town of Ashwood to its enemies.

He was sentenced to labor in the fields and the barns of Ashwood for the rest of his natural life — to plant, and tend, and harvest, and to carry what he harvested to the hungry. He would never again hold a position of trust in the town. He would never again carry a weapon. He would sleep in a room in the Voss farmhouse, under the eye of the family whose friend had died because of him.

And every Sunday, he would sit in the front pew of First Baptist Church, where everyone could see him, and hear the Word of God.

When the vote was done, Mayor Brooks looked down at him from the pulpit.

"Russ," he said. "Do you accept this?"

Keller lifted his wet face.

"'*Feed my sheep,*'" he whispered. "That's what the old man said. In the cell. That's what Jesus told Peter." He nodded slowly. "Yes. I accept it."

And from the front pew behind him, his six-year-old granddaughter Emma — who had been told very firmly by her mother to sit still and be quiet — scrambled over the back of the pew and ran to her grandfather and threw her arms around his neck.

"Grandpa," she said, very loudly, in the silent sanctuary. "Are you coming home now?"

Russ Keller held her and could not answer.

* * *

The Courthouse Square

March 17 — 4:00 p.m.

The question of the flag came up at the town meeting on the seventeenth.

Everyone had known it would. Since Mercer's report, the whole town had been talking about it — in the ration line, at the tool library, on the church steps, in the fields where the plowing had begun. *What do we do with the flag? When it's signed. When the United States doesn't exist anymore. Do we take it down? Do we keep flying it? Is it a lie, now, to fly it? Or is it a lie to take it down?*

They met in the square itself, because the weather had turned mild and the sun was shining and it seemed right to decide it there, beneath the bent pole where the flag still flew.

It was a long meeting. People said a great many things.

A farmer who had served in the Marines said the flag should fly until the last man in Ashwood who remembered what it meant was dead. A refugee from Mansfield said it should come down, because the government that flew it had surrendered them to the Council without asking anyone. An old woman said she had pledged allegiance to it every morning in school for twelve years and would not stop now. A teenager from Noah's youth group said, very quietly, that he wasn't sure you could pledge allegiance to a flag and to Jesus both, when the country that flew the flag had just handed itself over to the Antichrist.

That silenced the square for a long time.

It was Noah Simmons, in the end, who stood up on the courthouse steps and said the thing that settled it.

"I've raised that flag every morning since June," he said. "Me and the youth group. And lowered it every night. Even during the shelling. Even after the battle." He looked up at it — torn and faded, shredded at the bottom, hanging from its bent pole. "I never really thought about why. I just did it because somebody had to."

He was quiet for a moment.

"I think I know why now," he said. "It's not because of the government. The government's gone. It's not because of the country, even. The country's gone too." He looked out at the square. "It's because of

the people who died for it. My great-grandpa at Normandy. Mr. Reynolds's friends in Afghanistan. Luis and Hal and Walt and Reggie, on the night of the battle." He paused. "They didn't die for a government in Colorado. They died for *us.* For the idea that people ought to be free to worship God and govern themselves and not have somebody far away write their names in a book."

He looked up at the flag again.

"I don't think we should take it down," he said. "But I don't think we should fly it the way we used to, either. Like it's the most important thing. It's not. It never was." He turned and pointed to the steeple of First Baptist Church, rising above the rooftops two blocks away, with the white cross at its peak catching the afternoon sun. "*That's* the most important thing. That's the only flag that's never going to surrender."

The square was silent.

"So I think we fly it under the cross," Noah said. "On the church. Lower than the cross. So everybody who sees it knows what comes first." He swallowed. "And I think we remember. That's all. We remember what it meant. And we remember that it's gone. And we remember Who isn't."

For a long moment, nobody said anything.

Then Jack Reynolds — twenty-two years in the Army, three combat tours, a man who had worn that flag on his shoulder in places he still would not talk about — stood up at the back of the crowd and began, slowly, to clap.

* * *

They took the flag down from the bent pole at sunset.

Jack did it himself, with Noah beside him. He lowered it slowly, hand over hand, the way he had been taught at Fort Benning twenty-two years ago, and Noah caught it before it touched the ground. And then — in the middle of the ruined courthouse square, in front of three thousand people — the old Ranger and the eighteen-year-old preacher folded it into a triangle, thirteen folds, the way flags are folded at soldiers' funerals. Tight and neat, with only the blue field and the white stars showing.

Jack held it for a long moment against his chest.

Then he handed it to Rebecca Whitfield, and she carried it up the street to First Baptist Church, and up the ladder into the bell tower, and fastened it to the iron railing of the belfry, beneath the white cross on the steeple.

It hung there, folded, in the last red light of the sun. Not flying. Resting.

And at the foot of the empty flagpole in the courthouse square, where the flag had flown for a hundred and fifty years, Samuel Graves set down a stone.

It was a plain fieldstone, gray and rounded, about the size of a man's head, that he had pulled out of the soybean field behind his farmhouse that morning. He set it on the frozen ground at the foot of the pole, and stood beside it, leaning on his cane.

“When Samuel the prophet beat the Philistines,” the old farmer said, “he set up a stone between Mizpeh and Shen. And he called it Ebenezer. ‘*Hitherto hath the LORD helped us.*’” He looked down at the stone. “First Samuel seven.” He looked up at the crowd. “I’m not a prophet. But I figure if the Lord brought us this far, somebody ought to put a stone down to remember it.”

He stepped back.

For a moment, nobody moved.

Then Gary Voss limped forward on his crutches, and bent down with difficulty, and set a stone beside Samuel’s. A small, smooth creek stone, from Sugar Run, where they had broken the ice to baptize.

Then Linda Marsh, with a stone from the ruins of her farmhouse chimney.

Then Hannah Voss, with a chip of black limestone from the base of the grain elevator.

Then Tess Albright, with nineteen small pebbles in a coffee can, one for each of the orphans from Mansfield. The children came up behind her in a line and placed them one by one.

Then Travis and Cody Boone, together.

Then Carl Haskins and Danny, with a stone from the bottom of the Hollister quarry that Carl had carried in his pocket for twenty-six miles.

Then Rachel Monroe, with a stone from the ditch on Route 13 where she had lain hiding from Kane’s convoy on the night before she came to Ashwood.

Then Ethan.

He had not planned to. He had not brought a stone. He stood at the edge of the crowd and watched the others come, one after another, until the cairn at the foot of the empty flagpole was knee-high and growing.

Then he walked to Sycamore Street in the dusk, to the ruin of his house, and knelt in the ashes of the kitchen, and dug with his hands until he found a piece of the old stone foundation that had come loose in the fire. He carried it back to the square in both arms.

He set it on the cairn.

Then he stood back, and looked at it, and said, very quietly, the words Samuel had said.

“‘*Hitherto hath the LORD helped us.*’”

All around the square, three thousand voices said it with him.

* * *

Hillside Cemetery

March 18 — 3:00 p.m.

He moved the roses on the eighteenth.

It was Sarah's idea. She had come out to Sycamore Street with him on the afternoon after the flag came down, and they had stood at the fence looking at the scorched rose canes, and she had said, *They'll die here, you know. Nobody's going to live on this lot again. Nobody's going to water them.* And then, after a moment: *Emily's stone is on the hill. There's room beside it.*

So on the eighteenth, when the ground had thawed enough to dig, they came out to Sycamore Street with two shovels and a wheelbarrow and dug up Emily Walker's knockout roses, all six of them, with as much of their roots as they could get, and wrapped the root balls in wet burlap, and wheeled them two miles through the muddy streets to Hillside Cemetery.

They planted them in a half circle around the granite stone that Ethan had carved in the summer.

EMILY ANNE WALKER AND OUR DAUGHTER "NOT LOST — ONLY GONE BEFORE." CAUGHT UP TO MEET THE LORD

When they were finished, the roses stood in the raw earth around the stone, brown and bare and scorched, looking more dead than alive.

"They'll come back," Sarah said. She was kneeling in the mud beside the last one, pressing the soil down around its roots with her bare hands. "By June. You'll see. Knockout roses are impossible to kill."

"That's what Emily said."

"Emily was right." Sarah sat back on her heels and looked up at him. There was mud on her face and in her hair. "She was right about a lot of things."

Ethan looked down at her for a long moment.

Then he held out his hand and pulled her to her feet, and did not let go.

They stood together beside the stone, in the mild March sunlight, holding hands, looking at six brown rose bushes in the raw earth.

"I don't know what's going to happen," Ethan said finally. "To any of us. Elijah said it gets worse. Seven years, and it gets worse every year. The registration. The mark. The hunting." He was quiet for a moment. "I don't know if it's right to — to start something. With the world ending."

Sarah looked at him.

"The world's been ending since April," she said. "People got married anyway. Maggie and Kyle had Caleb. Angela had her baby in a stairwell in a burning hospital. Tess took nineteen kids out of Mansfield." She squeezed his hand. "I don't think God stops giving us good things just because the world's ending, Ethan. I think He gives us more of them. So we'll have something to hold on to."

Ethan looked down at their joined hands.

He thought of Emily, at the kitchen sink on an April afternoon. Of her voice on the phone, the last thing he had ever heard her say — something about the grocery list, something so ordinary he could not remember it now. Of her Bible in his coat pocket, with its pink sticky notes and its underlined verses.

He thought: *She would want this.* And he knew it was true. Emily had always wanted him to be happy. She had prayed for it, for eleven years, every night, while he pretended to be asleep.

“Not yet,” he said quietly. “I’m not ready yet.”

“I know,” Sarah said. “I’m not going anywhere.”

They stood beside the stone until the sun went down behind the hill.

* * *

First Baptist Church

March 20 — 5:45 a.m.

The signing was set for noon, Jerusalem time. Six o’clock in the morning in Ohio.

The satellite television in the high school gymnasium was ready. Ashley Trent had checked the dish on the roof the night before. The gym was open. Anyone who wanted to watch could watch.

Almost nobody went.

Instead, at a quarter to six in the morning on the first day of spring, the people of Ashwood came to First Baptist Church.

Nobody had asked them to. Rebecca had not announced anything. Samuel had not organized anything. They simply came — by the hundreds, and then by the thousands, in the gray light before dawn, walking up Church Street and Maple Avenue and Main Street from every corner of town. Farmers from the outer ring. Refugees from the Hollow and the fairgrounds. Evan Lowe and the boys from Harlan’s Crossing. Tess and her nineteen orphans. The Voss family, and Russ Keller walking behind them. Carl Haskins and Danny and Jolene. Linda Marsh. Tom Garrison and Lily, with Mr. Buttons. Isaiah Freeman. Dale Kirby. Travis and Cody Boone. Hannah Voss, with Luis Ortega’s rifle left at home on its hooks on her bedroom wall.

They filled the sanctuary. The balcony. The foyer. The lawn. The street.

In the bell tower, Noah Simmons stood beneath the great iron bell with the folded flag fastened to the railing beside him, and watched them come.

Inside, Rebecca Whitfield stood at the pulpit with her father’s Bible open in front of her. She did not preach. She did not know what she would have said.

Instead, at six o’clock exactly, she simply said, “Let’s pray.”

And ten thousand people bowed their heads.

* * *

In the commissioners’ chamber of the courthouse, two blocks away, Daniel Mercer sat alone at the long walnut table with the shortwave radio, and listened.

Someone had to. Someone had to write it down.

The broadcast came from the Temple Mount. He could hear the crowd — a million people, the announcer said, filling every street and square and rooftop of the Old City of Jerusalem. He could hear the choir of ten thousand voices singing *One Family.* He could hear the bells of every church in Jerusalem ringing, and the calls from every minaret, and the blowing of shofars from the Western Wall.

He could hear the names being read. One by one. The leaders of the nations, stepping forward to the long white table on the white stage beneath the golden Dome, to sign.

The Prime Minister of Israel. The King of Jordan. The President of Egypt. The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia. The Supreme Leader of Iran. The President of the Palestinian Authority. The Presidents and Prime Ministers of forty-one nations of the Council.

And the man who called himself the Acting President of the Provisional Government of the United States, stepping forward to sign away the last remnant of the country that had been founded in Philadelphia two hundred and fifty years before.

Mercer wrote it all down.

Then the crowd went silent. Completely silent — a million people, holding their breath.

And the voice came.

"*My friends. My brothers and sisters of the human family. Today, on this holy mountain, in this holy city, on the first day of spring, the old world ends.*"

"*For seven years, the nations of the earth have pledged themselves to peace. For seven years, Jerusalem will be the capital of the world. For seven years, no army will march, no bomb will fall, no child will starve.*"

"*And at the end of seven years, I promise you, there will be no need for another covenant. Because by then, we will have become what we were always meant to be.*"

"*One people. One family. One world.*"

"*I sign this Covenant in the name of that world. And in the name of peace.*"

Mercer heard the scratch of a pen. Amplified. Echoing across the Temple Mount.

And then the roar of a million voices, and the bells, and the shofars, and the choir, and the fireworks bursting over Jerusalem in broad daylight.

Daniel Mercer looked at his watch.

6:14 a.m., Eastern Time. March 20.

He wrote it down.

Then he turned off the radio, and put on his coat, and walked the two blocks to First Baptist Church, where ten thousand people were praying in the gray dawn, and slipped in through the side door, and handed a slip of paper to Rebecca Whitfield at the pulpit.

She read it. Her face went white.

She did not say anything for a long moment.

Then she picked up a pen, and opened her father's Bible to the ninth chapter of Daniel, and in the margin beside the twenty-seventh verse — beside her father's faded blue handwriting, and his underlining, and his notes — she wrote, in her own small, careful hand:

March 20. 6:14 a.m. The covenant is signed. Seven years. — R.W.

* * *

She closed the Bible and looked up at the congregation.

Ten thousand faces looked back at her. In the pews. In the balcony. In the doorways and the windows. Farmers and refugees and soldiers and orphans and nurses and prisoners and preachers. The Remnant of Ashwood.

"It's signed," she said.

Her voice carried to every corner of the church.

Nobody spoke.

"My father told us," Rebecca said. "On the tapes. He told us this day would come. A man would make a covenant with many for seven years. The world would call it peace. And the Temple would be rebuilt." She looked down at the Bible. "It's happened. Exactly the way he said. Exactly the way Daniel said, two thousand five hundred years ago."

She looked up.

"So I want to tell you what else he said," she said. "Because it matters now. More than it ever has."

She did not open the Bible. She did not need to.

"He said that everything we've lived through this winter — the vanishing, the bombs, the famine, the plague, the war, the betrayal, the fires, the ninety graves on the hill — is only the beginning of sorrows. That's what Jesus called it. *The beginning.*" Her voice shook. "He said that in the middle of these seven years, that man in Jerusalem is going to walk into the Temple and call himself God. He said there's going to be a mark, and no one will be able to buy or sell without it. He said believers will be hunted. He said many of us will die."

The church was absolutely silent.

"That's the truth," Rebecca said. "And I'm not going to pretend it isn't. Not today. Not on this day."

She took a breath.

"But he said something else, too," she said. "And I want you to hear it. I want you to carry it out of this church today and never, ever forget it."

She lifted her father's Bible in both hands and held it up, the way he used to hold it up on Sunday mornings, when she was a girl rolling her eyes in the fourth pew.

"He said: *Seven years is not forever.*"

A murmur moved through the church.

“Seven years,” Rebecca said. “Not seventy. Not seven hundred. Seven. And at the end of them —” her voice broke, and steadied — “at the end of them, the sky is going to split open like a curtain. And every eye is going to see Him. And He’s going to come down on a white horse with every saint who ever lived behind Him — my father and my mother, and Ethan’s wife and little girl, and Hal and Luis and Walt and Reggie and Martha Kimble and Kelsey Dunn and Pastor Deckard and every single one of those ninety people on the hill — and He is going to put His feet down on the Mount of Olives, right across the valley from where that man signed his covenant this morning.”

She was weeping openly now. So was half the church.

“And that man in Jerusalem,” Rebecca said, “with all his armies and all his treaties and all his registration forms and his Accord Credits and his golden seal — that man is going to be thrown into the lake of fire. And the covenant with death is going to be disannulled. And every knee is going to bow. *Every* knee.” She lowered the Bible. “And *our* King is going to reign.”

She stood at the pulpit, small and straight, with tears running down her face.

“The darkest days are still ahead of us,” she said softly. “I won’t lie to you. But the morning is coming. It’s always coming. ‘*Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.*’”

She looked out at them — ten thousand faces in her father’s church, in a town that had survived the breaking of America.

“So we stand,” she said. “Together. We keep the Word open. We keep telling the truth. We feed whoever comes to the door. We don’t take the mark, no matter what it costs. And we lift up our heads.” Her voice rose. “Because our redemption is drawing nigh. Seven years closer, starting today.”

* * *

Up in the bell tower, Noah Simmons had heard every word through the open trapdoor.

He stood beneath the great iron bell, with the folded flag fastened to the railing beside him, and looked out through the louvered shutters of the belfry at the town spread out below — the courthouse with its boarded windows, the half-burned grain elevator, the fields turning green at the edges where the snow had gone, the long brown furrows in Hal Whitaker’s north field, the ninety graves on Hillside with six brown rose bushes standing in a half circle around a granite stone.

And to the east, the sun, coming up.

He reached for the bell rope.

He did not ring an alarm. He did not ring three times, or continuously. He rang it the way Pastor Caleb Whitfield used to ring it on Sunday mornings, thirty years ago, before anyone in Ashwood had ever heard of a man from Geneva, or a covenant in Jerusalem, or the end of the United States of America.

Slow. Deep. Steady.

A call to worship.

And down below, in the sanctuary of First Baptist Church, ten thousand people who had survived the breaking of America lifted their voices and sang — not a hymn of mourning, and not a hymn of war, but one of the great old hymns of the Church, the kind that had been sung in prison camps in Siberia and in house churches in China and in every dark place where the people of God had ever gathered to wait for the dawn.

"*Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty! Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee; Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty! God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!*"

The bell rang out over Ashwood, slow and deep and steady, across the burned fields and the new furrows and the graves on the hill, and out into the vast, broken, silent country beyond, where there was no longer any such thing as the United States of America.

But there was still a King.

And He was coming.

"*And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh.*"

— Luke 21:28

* * *

END OF CHAPTER 20

EPILOGUE

The New Order Begins

"*And the ten horns which thou sawest are ten kings, which have received no kingdom as yet; but receive power as kings one hour with the beast. These have one mind, and shall give their power and strength unto the beast.*"

— Revelation 17:12–13

* * *

Geneva, Switzerland

June 21 — 8:00 p.m. local time

They came from every corner of the earth.

For three days, the aircraft had been landing at Geneva — sleek gray jets with no markings, and old presidential airliners with the flags of their nations painted over, and helicopters by the hundred, settling onto the lawns along the lake like a flock of great metal birds. The city had been closed to all traffic but theirs. The streets along the waterfront had been lined with soldiers in the new pale-blue

uniform of the Council's Peacekeeping Authority, standing at attention every ten meters from the airport to the Palais des Nations.

Now, on the evening of the longest day of the year, the leaders of the world sat in the great hall of the Palais, beneath the domed ceiling and the tall windows full of the long gold light of the summer evening, and waited.

There were not as many of them as there had been on the Night of Nations in February. There did not need to be. In the three months since the Covenant was signed in Jerusalem, the Council had done what the Framework had called for, eleven weeks before the vanishing: it had consolidated.

The nations of the earth — the two hundred of them that had still existed, in one form or another, in the spring — had been gathered into ten great regions. Ten Regional Administrations, each with a single Administrator appointed by the Council, each governing a quarter of a continent or more. North America. South America. Western Europe. Eastern Europe and Russia. The Middle East. North Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa. South Asia. East Asia. Oceania and the Pacific.

Ten.

The ten Administrators sat now in a row of white chairs on the white stage at the front of the hall, beneath the vast blue silk banner with its golden seal. Behind them, in the long curving rows, sat the kings and presidents and prime ministers of the old nations — no longer heads of state, now, but deputies and governors and advisers to the Administrators, their flags furled and cased and set aside.

In the fourth chair from the left sat a slim, fair-haired man in a charcoal suit, with his hands folded in his lap and a pleasant, patient expression on his face.

Julian Sorensen. Administrator, North American Region.

At eight o'clock exactly, the lights in the great hall dimmed. A single spotlight fell on the center of the stage.

And the man in the plain dark suit walked out into it.

* * *

He did not speak at first.

He simply stood in the center of the stage, in the spotlight, and looked out over the hall — at the kings and presidents in their rows, at the cameras broadcasting to every corner of the earth, at the ten Administrators seated in their white chairs on either side of him. His face was calm. His dark eyes were full of that same terrible, patient sorrow that four billion people had come to love.

Then he turned to the ten.

And one by one, the ten Administrators of the world rose from their white chairs, and crossed the stage to where he stood, and knelt.

Not all the way to the floor. It was not quite that. It was a bow — a deep, formal bow from the waist, the kind that courtiers once made to kings. But they held it. Each of them. For a long moment, in the spotlight, with the cameras of the world upon them.

And each of them, as he bowed, laid a single sheet of paper on a white table at the Chairman's feet.

It was a charter. Ten charters. The instruments of authority by which each Administrator governed a tenth of the human race. Each one embossed in the upper corner with a golden seal — a stylized globe encircled by twelve interlocking rings.

The last to bow was Julian Sorensen. He laid his charter on the table with the others, and straightened, and stepped back, and for just an instant, as he turned to return to his chair, the camera caught his face.

He was smiling.

When all ten had returned to their seats, the man in the plain dark suit bent down and gathered the ten charters from the white table into his hands. He held them for a long moment, looking down at them.

Then he lifted his eyes to the cameras.

"*My friends,*" he said.

His voice filled the great hall, and every radio and television and satellite receiver on earth.

"*Three months ago, in Jerusalem, the nations of the world made a covenant of peace. Tonight, the governors of the world have made a covenant of trust.*"

"*They have placed in my hands the authority to act on behalf of the whole human family — to coordinate, to protect, to provide. Not because I asked for it. I did not. But because they understood, as I hope all of you understand, that a world united in peace must be united in purpose. That a single family must have a single voice.*"

He held up the ten charters.

"*I accept this trust. I accept it humbly. And I promise you — every man, woman, and child on this earth — that I will not fail you.*"

"*From this day forward, there will be no more nations. No more borders. No more wars. There will only be the Council of Nations, and the ten regions, and the one people of earth.*"

"*And so that every member of that one people may share fully in its blessings — its food, its medicine, its security, its prosperity — I am announcing tonight the final phase of the Initiative.*"

"*Beginning on the first day of the new year, every resident of every region will receive a Unity Registration. A single, secure, permanent identity, linked to the Accord Credit and to every service of the Council. It will be simple. It will be painless. It will be free. And it will ensure that no one — no one — is ever again left behind.*"

He smiled — that shy, boyish, luminous smile.

"*And to mark this new beginning, the Council will build a new capital. Not in Geneva. Not in New York. Not in any of the old cities of the old world. We will build it in the cradle of civilization, where the human story began — on the banks of the Euphrates River, in the land between the rivers, on the ancient ground where men once tried to build a tower that would reach to heaven.*"

"*This time, we will finish it.*"

The great hall rose to its feet.

The applause went on for eleven minutes. The camera swept across the hall, across the kings and presidents on their feet, across the ten Administrators in their white chairs, across the tall windows full of the long gold light of the longest day of the year.

And behind the man in the spotlight, on the vast blue silk banner, the golden seal gleamed.

* * *

Jerusalem

June 21 — 9:15 p.m. local time

Rabbi Eliezer Adler did not watch the broadcast from Geneva.

He was standing on the Temple Mount, on the northern end of the great stone platform, in the long blue dusk, watching the workmen.

They had begun in April, three weeks after the Covenant was signed. First the surveyors, with their lasers and their instruments. Then the archaeologists, digging carefully beneath the paving stones in the place where the scholars said the Holy of Holies had once stood. Then the stonemasons, with the great blocks of pale Jerusalem limestone cut in the quarries north of the city and brought in on trucks through the Lions' Gate.

Now, on the evening of the twenty-first of June, the foundation was laid.

The old rabbi stood at its edge and looked down at it — the first course of pale stone, set into the living rock of Mount Moriah, in the place where Solomon had built and Zerubbabel had rebuilt and Herod had rebuilt again, and where Titus had burned it all to the ground in the year 70.

Nineteen hundred and fifty-six years.

The young men of his yeshiva had wept when the first stone was laid. They had danced. They had sung the Psalms of Ascent on the Temple Mount for the first time since the Romans came, and the soldiers in pale blue had stood by and smiled and let them.

Rabbi Adler had not danced.

He stood at the edge of the new foundation now, in his prayer shawl, with his worn book of Psalms in his hands, and looked down at the pale stone, and thought of a passage from the prophet Daniel that his grandfather had made him memorize as a boy in Kraków.

And in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease, and for the overspreading of abominations he shall make it desolate.

He had spent his whole life believing that the man who rebuilt the Temple would be the Messiah.

He was eighty-three years old. He was no longer sure of anything.

In the pocket of his long black coat was a small book he had been given two weeks ago, by an old man with white hair and a long dark coat and a walking staff, who had stood beside him at the Western Wall

one morning at dawn and prayed in perfect Hebrew, and then turned to him and said, very gently, in English, *Rabbi, I think you should read this. I think you've been waiting your whole life to read it.*

It was a New Testament.

Rabbi Eliezer Adler had not opened it yet.

But he had not thrown it away, either.

He put his hand on it now, through the black wool of his coat, and stood at the edge of the new foundation in the blue Jerusalem dusk, and prayed the prayer he had been praying every morning since the Covenant was signed.

Master of the universe. Show me the truth. Whatever it costs.

* * *

Iron Ridge, Ohio

June 21 — 2:40 p.m.

Marcus Kane turned off the radio.

He sat in the leather chair in the study on the second floor of the manager's house, with the long summer light coming through the tall windows, and his right arm finally out of its sling, and looked at the silent radio for a long time.

On the desk in front of him lay a sheet of paper. It had arrived that morning, by helicopter, with a young man in a pale-blue uniform who had handed it to Dutch Kessler at the gate and flown away without a word.

It was printed on good white paper. In the upper corner, embossed in gold, was the seal.

NOTICE TO ALL RESIDENTS — NORTH AMERICAN REGIONAL ADMINISTRATION

UNITY REGISTRATION WILL BE MANDATORY FOR ALL PERSONS WITHIN THE REGION, EFFECTIVE JANUARY 1.

PERSONS WHO FAIL TO REGISTER WILL BE INELIGIBLE FOR FOOD, MEDICINE, EMPLOYMENT, SHELTER, AND ALL SERVICES OF THE COUNCIL.

— J. SORENSEN, ADMINISTRATOR

Marcus had read it eleven times.

He had not signed anything. He had not registered anyone. He had not answered any of the three messages Sorensen's office had sent since March. Iron Ridge still stood behind its wall of shipping containers, with its twelve hundred people — a thousand, now; some had left for the relief centers in Mansfield — and its two howitzers under tarps in the old slag yard, with not a single round left to fire from them.

He did not know what he was going to do.

For the first time in fourteen months, Marcus Kane did not know what he was going to do.

The door creaked behind him.

“Dad?”

“Come in, Tyler.”

The boy came in and sat on the leather couch by the cold fireplace. He was fifteen now. He had grown three inches since the winter. He had his mother’s Bible in his lap, the way he always did now, everywhere he went. He had stopped hiding it in March.

“I heard the radio,” Tyler said. “The ten Administrators.”

“Yes.”

Tyler was quiet for a moment.

“Mom’s Bible has a part about that,” he said. “Ten kings. That give their power to one man.” He looked down at the book in his lap. “In Revelation. And in Daniel, too. Pastor Whitfield talks about it on Tape Thirty-Four.”

Marcus did not answer.

He looked out the window, at the town below — the walls, the towers, the barracks, the gardens beginning to green in the long June light. At the road beyond the wall, running northeast toward Ashwood, twenty-six miles away.

He thought of a man standing alone in the middle of a ruined square, with a rifle lowered, saying *Because your wife was right.*

“Tyler,” he said finally. His voice was very low.

“Yes, sir?”

“Read me that part. In Daniel.” He did not turn from the window. “The ten kings.”

Tyler Kane looked at his father’s back for a long moment.

Then he opened his mother’s Bible, and turned the thin, soft pages, and began to read.

* * *

Hillside Cemetery — Ashwood, Ohio

June 21 — 6:30 p.m.

The roses had come back.

Ethan had not believed they would. He had come up the hill every week since March to look at them — six brown, scorched, bare canes standing in a half circle around the granite stone — and every week, they had looked more dead than the week before. He had stopped expecting anything. He had come anyway, because it was a place to be quiet.

And then, in the second week of May, the first green buds.

And now, on the evening of the longest day of the year, the six knockout roses that Emily Walker had planted beside the fence on Sycamore Street eleven years ago were blooming around her stone — great tumbling clusters of deep red flowers, so many of them that the canes bent under their weight, so bright in the long gold evening light that they seemed almost to glow.

Ethan sat on the stone bench beside them with Sarah's hand in his, and did not say anything for a long time.

"I told you," Sarah said softly. "Impossible to kill."

"You told me."

"*Emily* told you."

"Emily told me." He smiled. "She always did."

Below them, the long rows of new graves stretched down the western slope of the hill — ninety of them, and sixty-one more at the eastern edge, and a dozen more from the spring, when the last of the wounded had died. The grass had grown over them now, green and thick. Someone — Noah's youth group, Ethan suspected, though they had never said — had planted wildflowers along the rows. Black-eyed Susans. Chicory. Queen Anne's lace.

And beyond the cemetery, the town. The courthouse, with new glass in its windows. The grain elevator, its headhouse rebuilt with steel salvaged from the county barn. The spire of First Baptist Church, with a folded flag fastened to the railing of the bell tower beneath the white cross. The cairn of stones at the foot of the empty flagpole in the courthouse square, waist-high now, and still growing — people added to it every week.

And beyond the town, the fields.

Two hundred acres of Hal Whitaker's corn, knee-high and deep green and rippling in the evening breeze. And beside it the Voss fields, and the Graves fields, and the Marsh fields, where Tom Garrison and Linda Marsh had planted beans in the ashes of the barn. All the way to the horizon, green. The first harvest was still six weeks away. But it was coming. Everyone could see it coming.

In Hal's north field, far below, Ethan could see a figure moving slowly down a row with a hoe. A big, heavy man, stooped, working steadily in the long evening light, alone.

Russ Keller had been in that field every day since the first of April. He came at dawn and left at dark. He did not talk much. Gary Voss said he was the best hand with a hoe he had ever seen.

"I heard the broadcast," Sarah said quietly. "At the clinic. Tess had it on."

"I heard it."

"Ten." She shook her head. "Ten regions. Ten Administrators. And they bowed."

"I know."

“And the registration. January first.” Her hand tightened in his. “Ethan — no food, no medicine, no anything. For anyone who won’t register.” She was quiet for a moment. “That’s the mark, isn’t it? Or the beginning of it.”

“Samuel says it’s the beginning of it,” Ethan said. “The first mile. He says the mark comes later. But this is the road.”

“What are we going to do?”

Ethan looked out over the green fields, and the town, and the graves, and the roses blooming red around Emily’s stone.

“What we’ve always done,” he said. “Stand. Together.” He looked at her. “Rebecca called a meeting. Tonight. At the farmhouse. Just the ones who were there from the beginning.” He stood, and pulled her gently to her feet. “She said to bring your Bible.”

* * *

The Graves Farmhouse

June 21 — 9:00 p.m.

They met in Samuel Graves’s kitchen, because it was where so much of it had begun.

It was a big, plain farm kitchen, with a wood cookstove and a long oak table and green shutters on the windows, open now to the warm June night and the sound of the crickets in the soybean fields. A kerosene lamp hung from a hook above the table. The windows were full of the last blue light of the longest day, fading slowly into dark.

They sat around the long oak table — the ones who had been there from the beginning.

Samuel Graves at the head, in his old chair, with his wife’s Bible in front of him and his scarred hands folded on top of his hickory cane. Seventy-five now. He had had a birthday in May, and the whole town had come to the farm for it, and eaten pie made with Mennonite honey.

Mayor Daniel Brooks, and Ellen beside him. Ellen’s insulin had run out in April — the last of the twelve vials from Carl’s crate. And in the first week of April, a young man in a Mennonite black coat and broad-brimmed hat had driven a buggy up to the north gate of Ashwood with a small insulated cooler on the seat beside him. Bishop Brenneman had sent it. The bishop’s grandson, it turned out, had been a pharmacist in Wooster before the vanishing — and had carried out of the burning Kroger pharmacy, on the first night, every vial of insulin in its refrigerator, and kept it cold in the spring house at Pike’s Mill all winter, not knowing why, waiting for someone to need it. *There is enough for a year,* the young man had said. *My grandfather says the Lord told him Ashwood would need it.* Ellen had wept. So had Daniel.

Jack Reynolds, his side long healed, with a scar he did not talk about.

Sarah Collins, beside Ethan.

Daniel Mercer, who had spent the spring riding the roads of the Mountain Covenant in West Virginia and eastern Kentucky, carrying copies of Caleb Whitfield’s tapes and notebooks, and had come home a

week ago, thinner and quieter, with stories of house churches in hollows and caves and abandoned coal mines.

Rachel Monroe, with her satchel on the floor beside her chair — the Framework still inside it, all eighty-seven pages, and beside it now the old leather-bound death register from the county recorder's office, which she carried everywhere, and in which she was still writing names.

Noah Simmons, nineteen now, taller, with a thin white scar above his left eye.

And at the foot of the table, with her father's old black Scofield Bible open in front of her, Rebecca Whitfield.

* * *

For a while, nobody spoke.

They had all heard the broadcast. The ten Administrators, bowing. The ten charters, laid at his feet. The new capital on the Euphrates. The Unity Registration, mandatory, January first.

There was nothing to say about it that everyone at the table did not already know.

It was Rebecca who finally broke the silence.

"I've been thinking about my father," she said. "All day. Since the broadcast." She looked down at the Bible in front of her. "He sat in that bell tower, fourteen months before the vanishing, and recorded forty tapes for people he'd never meet. He didn't know if anyone would ever hear them. He didn't know if I'd ever believe." Her voice caught. "And he got it right. All of it. Every single thing he said on those tapes has happened. The vanishing. The wars. The famine. The man of peace. The covenant. The Temple." She paused. "And now the ten kings."

She turned the thin, soft pages of the Bible slowly, until it fell open — the way it always fell open, because her father had opened it there ten thousand times — to the seventh chapter of Daniel.

In the margin, in faded blue ink, in her father's cramped handwriting, were the words: *When you see the ten, look for the one. — C.W.*

She read aloud.

"'*After this I saw in the night visions, and behold a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible, and strong exceedingly; and it had great iron teeth: it devoured and brake in pieces, and stamped the residue with the feet of it: and it was diverse from all the beasts that were before it; and it had ten horns.*'"

The kitchen was very quiet. Outside, the crickets sang.

"'*I considered the horns, and, behold, there came up among them another little horn, before whom there were three of the first horns plucked up by the roots: and, behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of man, and a mouth speaking great things.*'"

She turned the page.

"'*And the ten horns out of this kingdom are ten kings that shall arise: and another shall rise after them; and he shall be diverse from the first, and he shall subdue three kings. And he shall speak great words*

against the most High, and shall wear out the saints of the most High, and think to change times and laws: and they shall be given into his hand until a time and times and the dividing of time.’”

She stopped.

Wear out the saints of the most High.

Nobody moved.

Then, across the table, Ethan Walker opened his wife’s Bible.

It was Emily’s Bible — the one he had carried out of the burning kitchen on Sycamore Street, in the inside pocket of his coat, beside the crayon drawing and the photograph of his daughter in the pink rain slicker. Its pages were full of her pink sticky notes and her underlining and her small, round, careful handwriting in the margins.

He turned to the thirteenth chapter of Revelation.

In the margin, in pink ink, Emily had written a single line, years ago, in a Wednesday night Bible study he had never once attended:

Pray for Ethan. He’ll need to know this someday.

He looked at it for a long moment. His eyes stung.

Then he read aloud.

“‘*And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy… And all the world wondered after the beast. And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto the beast: and they worshipped the beast, saying, Who is like unto the beast? who is able to make war with him?’*”

His voice was steady. He did not know how.

“‘*And it was given unto him to make war with the saints, and to overcome them: and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations. And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.’*”

He turned the page. Further down, Emily had underlined three verses twice.

“‘*And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.’*”

He stopped.

No man might buy or sell.

Ineligible for food, medicine, employment, shelter, and all services of the Council.

Effective January first.

He closed his wife’s Bible and set it on the long oak table beside Rebecca’s father’s.

* * *

The room fell silent.

Not the silence of fear. Not quite. Something deeper than that. The silence of people who have understood something all at once, together, and cannot yet find words for it.

The lamp hissed above the table. The crickets sang in the dark fields beyond the open windows. Far away, faint across the soybean fields, the bell in the tower of First Baptist Church rang once, and then again — Noah's youth group, ringing the hour.

Ethan looked around the table.

At Samuel, old and scarred and steady, with his hands on his cane. At Brooks and Ellen, holding hands. At Jack, with his jaw set and his eyes on the lamp. At Mercer, who had written it all down. At Rachel, with her satchel full of names. At Noah, with his scar, the watchman. At Sarah, beside him, her hand finding his under the table. At Rebecca, at the foot of the table, with her father's Bible open to the seventh chapter of Daniel, and tears on her face.

They had survived.

They had survived the vanishing, and the bombs, and the collapse. They had survived the famine and the plague and the winter. They had survived Marcus Kane and his nine hundred men and his two cannons. They had survived the betrayal of one of their own. They had buried a hundred and fifty of their neighbors on a hill, and planted two hundred acres of corn in the ashes of their farms, and watched it grow.

They had survived the breaking of America.

And now, as the longest day of the year faded into night over the green fields of Ohio, they understood — all of them, together, in the silence of an old farmhouse kitchen — that it had only been the beginning.

The nations were gone. The borders were gone. The old world was gone.

In its place, rising on the banks of the Euphrates, a single kingdom was being built. Ten kings had knelt before one man. Four billion people had cheered. And in six months, every soul on earth would be asked to take his name.

Something far greater than Marcus Kane was coming.

Something far greater than war, or famine, or plague.

The rise of a global kingdom.

* * *

It was Samuel Graves who finally spoke.

He did not stand. He simply unfolded his scarred hands from the top of his cane, and reached across the long oak table, and laid one hand on Rebecca's father's Bible and the other on Emily Walker's.

“Well,” the old farmer said quietly. “We knew it was coming.”

Nobody answered.

“We’ve got six months,” Samuel said. “Six months before January. Six months before they start asking.” He looked around the table. “That’s a long time, if you use it right. That’s time to teach every believer in this town what Caleb’s notebooks say. Time to copy every tape a thousand more times and send them to every hollow and cellar and cave from here to Kentucky. Time to find places to hide, if we have to. Time to store up food, and seed, and medicine. Time to pray.”

He looked at Rebecca.

“Time to get ready, like your daddy said.”

Rebecca wiped her eyes and nodded.

“And one more thing,” Samuel said.

He picked up Rebecca’s father’s Bible from the table — gently, the way you might pick up a sleeping child — and turned the pages slowly, past Daniel, past the Gospels, past the letters of Paul, all the way to the very end. To the last two chapters of the last book.

He did not read from it. He did not need to. He simply held it open on the table, so that everyone could see the page.

In the margin, in faded blue ink, in Caleb Whitfield’s cramped, careful handwriting, underlined three times:

Read the end of the Book, Becky. We win.

The old farmer set the Bible down on the long oak table, open to the twenty-first chapter of Revelation, and folded his hands on his cane, and smiled.

“‘*And I saw a new heaven and a new earth,*’” he said softly. “‘*For the first heaven and the first earth were passed away… And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.*’”

He looked around the table at each of them, one by one.

“That’s the new order,” Samuel Graves said. “The only one that’s going to last.”

Outside, in the dark, the bell of First Baptist Church began to ring again — slow, and deep, and steady — out over the green fields and the silent town and the graves on the hill, where six red rose bushes bloomed around a granite stone in the starlight.

And in an old farmhouse kitchen in the heart of a broken country, ten people who had survived the end of one world bowed their heads together, and began to pray for the strength to face the next.

* * *

“*He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.*”

— Revelation 22:20

* * *

THE END

of

THE BREAKING OF AMERICA

Book Two of the Ashes of America Series

* * *

The story continues in

Book Three

THE NEW ORDER

A Closing Prayer

“Father, I thank You for every reader who has walked through these pages. For the one who does not yet know You, I pray they would hear Your voice and receive Your Son, Jesus, as Lord and Savior. For the one who already believes, I pray You would set their heart ablaze with urgency—to speak, to share, to love, and to never be silent. May we all live as faithful watchmen, sounding the trumpet until the day You call us home. In Jesus’ mighty name, Amen.”

THE BIBLE WAY TO HEAVEN

1. Admit you are a sinner.

"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

No one is good enough to go to Heaven on his own merit.

No matter how much good we do, we still come short.

2. Realize the penalty for sin.

"For the wages of sin is death..." (Romans 6:23a)

Just as there are wages for good, there is punishment for wrong.

The penalty for our sin is eternal death in a place called Hell.

3. Believe that Jesus Christ died, was buried, and rose again for you.

"That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved." (Romans 10:9)

4. Trust Christ alone as your Saviour.

"...But the gift of God is eternal life though Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 6:23b)

"For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Romans 10:13)

Eternal life is a gift purchased by the blood of Jesus and offered freely to those who call upon Him by faith.

Anyone who believes on the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved forever. Being saved is a one-time event.

Dr. Paul Crawford is more than just a Christian Author; His books are a source of inspiration and guidance on your spiritual journey. His books are created with a deep sense of faith and a desire to uplift and inspire all who read.

AMERICA IS NO LONGER ONE NATION.
IT IS BECOMING HUNDREDS.

Six months after the Rapture. Six months after nuclear fire devastated twenty-three American cities. Six months after civilization collapsed. Now the real war begins.

Towns turn against towns. Neighbors become enemies.
Leaders make impossible choices. Disease spreads.
The national government vanishes into the shadows.
And a charismatic world leader rises, promising peace, unity, and a new beginning.

Ashwood has survived against all odds, but Iron Ridge is coming. Led by the ruthless Marcus Kane, a growing army will stop at nothing to conquer every community in its path. Ashwood stands in the way. The battle for freedom is about to erupt.

In the midst of chaos, believers stand firm. They cling to God's Word. They protect the vulnerable. They pray. They fight. They love. They refuse to bow to fear—or to any man.
But even as bullets fly and cities burn, the world watches a different battle unfold on the global stage.
Peace is being offered.
But at what cost?

IN THE BREAKING OF AMERICA, YOU'LL DISCOVER:

- A gripping story of survival, sacrifice, and unwavering faith
- The collapse of order—and the rise of new and dangerous powers
- The spiritual strength of a remnant determined to honor God
- The chilling fulfillment of biblical prophecy in real time
- Hope that shines brightest when the world grows darkest



The Breaking of America is a powerful continuation of the *Ashes of America* series that will keep you turning pages late into the night. More than a story, *it's a wake-up call. The world is breaking. But the Church must rise.*

THE BATTLE FOR AMERICA IS JUST THE BEGINNING.
THE BATTLE FOR ETERNITY HAS ALREADY BEGUN.