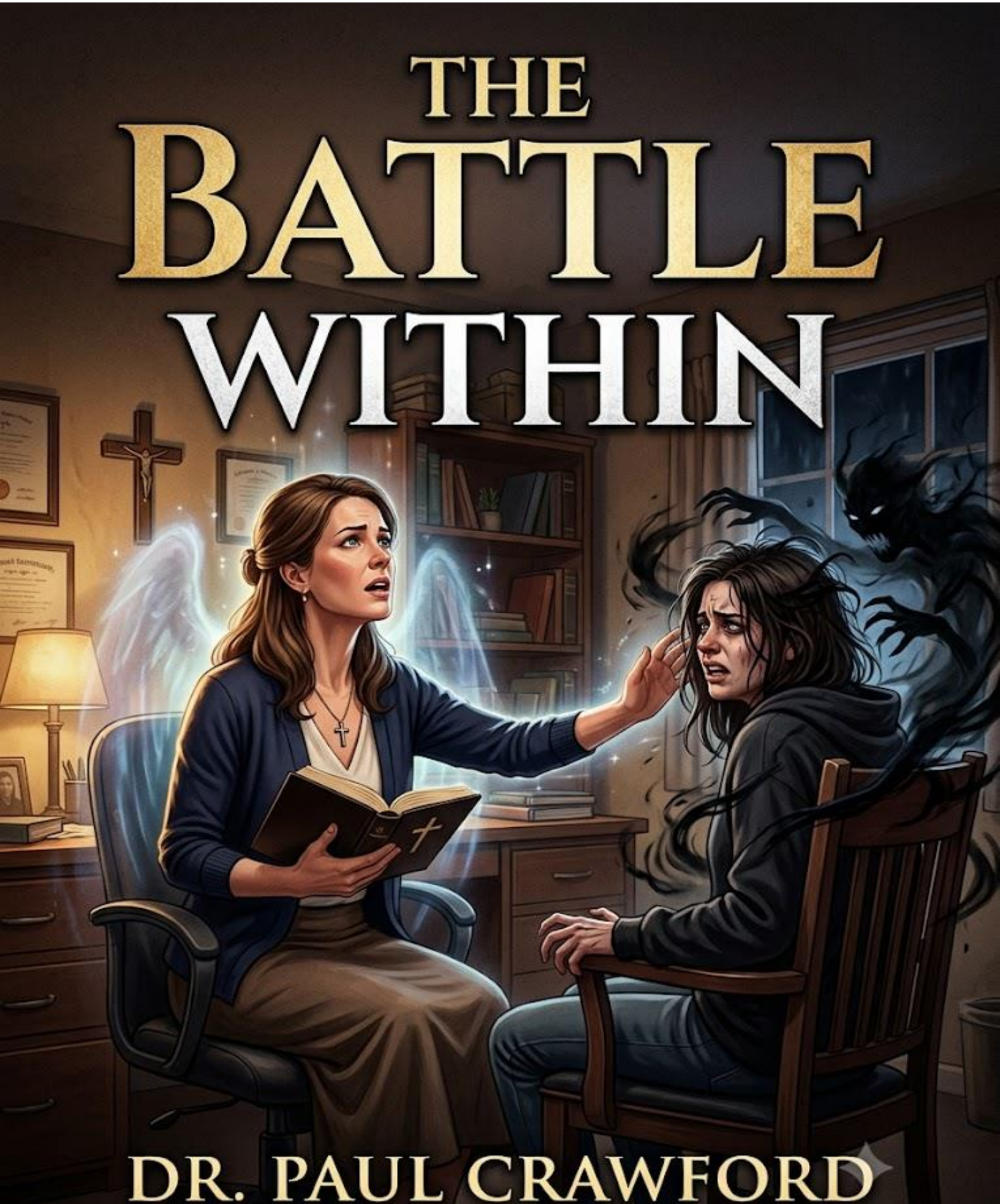
THE
BATTLE
WITHIN
DR. PAUL CRAWFORD

# The Battle Within

### A Christian Novel

### By Dr. Paul Crawford

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"For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." — Ephesians 6:12

# Introduction

There are battles that rage across nations. There are battles fought in courtrooms, hospitals, churches, and homes. Yet some of the greatest battles ever fought are invisible to the human eye. They occur in the minds, hearts, and souls of men and women every day.

The Battle Within is a story about one of those unseen conflicts.

Peggy Walters is a Christian counselor dedicated to helping people overcome emotional pain, broken relationships, addiction, fear, and despair. She believes in the healing power of God's Word and the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. However, she soon discovers that not every problem can be explained by psychology alone. Behind some wounds lurks a darker force—a spiritual enemy determined to destroy lives and keep people in bondage.

As Peggy listens to the stories of her clients, she begins to encounter events that challenge everything she thought she understood about counseling. Strange manifestations, terrifying encounters, and undeniable evidence of spiritual warfare force her to confront a reality many Christians acknowledge but few fully understand. The battle is not merely against human weakness, bad choices, or painful circumstances. It is a battle against the forces of darkness themselves.

Yet this novel is about more than demons, oppression, and spiritual attacks. At its heart, The Battle Within is a story about the struggle that takes place in every human soul. Each of us faces temptations, fears, doubts, and spiritual conflicts. Every day we must choose whether we will follow the voice of God or surrender to the lies of the enemy.

The Apostle Paul reminds believers:

"For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." (Ephesians 6:12)

These words form the foundation of this story.

While the events and characters in this novel are fictional, the spiritual truths they illustrate are rooted in Scripture. The enemy is real. Spiritual warfare is real. Temptation is real. But so is the power of God. Through Jesus Christ, believers possess everything necessary to stand firm against the attacks of darkness.

As you journey through these pages, you will walk beside Peggy Walters as she faces dangers that test her faith, challenge her courage, and deepen her dependence upon God. You will witness victories and setbacks, moments of fear and moments of triumph. Most importantly, you will be reminded that no matter how fierce the battle may become, Christ remains victorious.

The greatest battlefield is not found in a distant land. It is found within the human heart.

And the outcome of that battle determines eternity.

May this story encourage you to put on the whole armor of God, stand firm in your faith, and remember that through Christ, we are more than conquerors.

— Dr. Paul Crawford

# Preface

Throughout history, mankind has sought to understand the struggles that plague the human heart. We have searched for answers to fear, anxiety, addiction, anger, depression, hopelessness, and despair. While many of these struggles have emotional, physical, and psychological dimensions, Scripture teaches that there is also a spiritual dimension to life that cannot be ignored.

The Bible reveals that we live in a world where an unseen conflict is constantly taking place. God is at work drawing people to Himself, while Satan seeks to deceive, destroy, and enslave. This spiritual conflict touches every person, whether they recognize it or not.

The Battle Within was written to explore this reality through the medium of Christian fiction. While the characters, events, and circumstances in this novel are products of imagination, the spiritual principles behind them are firmly grounded in the truths of God's Word.

The character of Peggy Walters represents countless Christian men and women who faithfully serve others through counseling, ministry, discipleship, and prayer. Day after day, they encounter broken lives desperately searching for hope. They listen to stories of pain and suffering while pointing people to the healing power of Jesus Christ. Yet many who serve in ministry eventually discover that they are engaged in a battle much greater than they first imagined.

This novel does not seek to sensationalize demons or glorify darkness. Far too often, discussions about spiritual warfare become focused on the enemy rather than on the Lord. My desire is exactly the opposite. The purpose of this story is to magnify the power of Christ, the authority of Scripture, and the victory available to every believer through faith in Him.

As you read these pages, you will encounter moments of tension, conflict, fear, and uncertainty. Yet beneath every chapter runs a consistent message: God is greater than any force of darkness. No demon, temptation, stronghold, or spiritual attack can overcome the power of the risen Savior.

The title, *The Battle Within*, carries a double meaning. Certainly, it refers to the spiritual warfare that Peggy encounters as she ministers to those under demonic influence. But it also refers to the conflict that exists within every human soul. Each day we wrestle with doubt and faith, fear and courage, temptation and obedience, self-will and surrender to God.

In many ways, the greatest enemy we face is not outside of us but within us. The struggle for control of the heart is the central battle of every life.

My prayer is that this novel will entertain, inspire, and encourage readers to examine their own walk with God. May it remind believers that they are never alone in the fight. The Lord who calls us to battle also equips us for victory.

As the Apostle Paul wrote:

"Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might." (Ephesians 6:10)

May these words encourage you as you begin this journey.

To God be the glory.

**Dr. Paul Crawford**

# THE BATTLE WITHIN

*A Novel*

By Dr. Paul Crawford

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## CHAPTER ONE
## *The Counselor's Calling*

> *"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." — Ephesians 6:12 (NKJV)*

### I.

The morning came quietly to Clarksburg, Virginia, the way mornings always do in small Southern towns—gently, almost apologetically, as if the sun itself understood that some people needed a little more time to make peace with a new day. Dew clung to the old oaks along Meridian Street, and the scent of honeysuckle drifted through the barely-open window of Peggy Walters's car as she turned off Highway 11 and into the parking lot of the New Hope Counseling Center.

She sat for a moment with the engine idling.

It was 7:42 in the morning—eighteen minutes before her first client was scheduled to arrive—and already Peggy felt the familiar stirring in her chest that she had come to recognize over twenty-two years of practice. It was not anxiety, exactly. It was something older, something more rooted. Her mother had called it the weight of calling. Her seminary professor, Dr. Aldridge, had called it sacred anticipation. Peggy simply called it readiness.

She bowed her head over the steering wheel, her hands folded in her lap, and prayed the same prayer she had prayed every morning for two decades.

“Lord, let my ears hear what You hear. Let my eyes see what You see. And when I am not enough—which is always—let Your strength be made perfect in my weakness. Amen.”

She gathered her leather satchel, her thermos of dark coffee, and her well-worn Bible, and stepped out into the early September air.

## II.

New Hope Counseling Center occupied a renovated Victorian house at the corner of Meridian and Grace Streets—a coincidence of address that Peggy had always considered a gift from God. The building’s white clapboard siding had been freshly painted the previous spring, and a modest wooden sign above the porch steps read, in carved letters, THERE IS HOPE. Someone had planted marigolds along the front walkway, and they blazed orange and gold in the early morning light like small, determined fires.

The center had been founded twelve years earlier by Dr. Raymond Houser, a retired pastor who believed the church and the counseling room ought to be the same kind of sanctuary. When Dr. Houser passed away two years ago—quietly, in his sleep, as righteous men sometimes do—he had left the center to his staff and his God, trusting both equally. Peggy had been his senior counselor for nine of those twelve years. Now she served as clinical director, a title she wore lightly, like a borrowed coat.

She was fifty-four years old, though most people guessed younger. Her hair was the color of autumn wheat, streaked with silver at the temples, and she kept it pulled back during sessions in a simple clip. She was not a tall woman, but she carried herself with the kind of quiet authority that made people feel that if they were going to fall apart, this was the right place to do it.

Her credentials hung on the wall of her office in simple black frames: a Master’s in Clinical Psychology from Liberty University, a Doctor of Ministry with a concentration in Pastoral Counseling from Regent, and a certificate from the American Association of Christian Counselors. But the credential she trusted most was not on any wall. It was the callus on her knees from years of prayer, and the Scripture she had memorized before she knew what any of it would cost her.

## III.

Her first client that morning was a woman named Doris Henley, fifty-one, a deacon's wife referred by her family physician for what the intake paperwork described as "severe depression and intrusive thoughts." Doris had been coming for six weeks. She was a careful woman—careful with her words, careful with her emotions, careful with what she allowed herself to feel in the presence of another human being. Progress had been slow and honest, which Peggy considered the best kind.

After Doris came Marcus Webb, thirty-four, a former Marine wrestling with PTSD and a crisis of faith that had left him, by his own description, "standing in a burned-down church, holding a Bible I don't know how to read anymore." He was angry and brilliant and broken in all the ways that war breaks a person, and Peggy loved working with him because he never pretended.

After Marcus came the Kellerman couple, a forty-minute session that had produced exactly eleven minutes of actual communication in the past month.

It was a full morning. It was, in every visible way, an ordinary Thursday at New Hope Counseling Center.

Peggy could not have known—not then, not in the golden September quiet of that morning—that by the time the afternoon was over, she would have seen something that no textbook had ever prepared her for, and that the ordinary chapter of her life was closing even as she unlocked the front door and stepped inside.

## IV.

Her assistant, a cheerful young woman named Tamika Reeves, was already at her desk when Peggy arrived, sorting the afternoon's intake forms with the focused efficiency of someone who had discovered their spiritual gift was administration.

"Good morning, Dr. Walters." Tamika held up a manila folder. "We have a new intake at two o'clock. Walk-in from yesterday. She's a referral from Pastor Elias over at Bethel Chapel."

Peggy set her satchel on the reception counter and reached for the folder. "What do we know about her?"

"Her name is Lydia Crane. Thirty-seven years old. Pastor Elias called personally—said she's been…" Tamika hesitated, which was unusual. Tamika hesitated at very little. "He said she's been acting strangely. In church. During worship."

Peggy looked up from the folder. “Strangely how?”

Tamika clasped her hands on her desk, the way she did when she was choosing her words carefully. “He didn’t go into detail over the phone. But he said she screamed during the closing prayer last Sunday. Not a cry. A scream. And she—” Another pause. “He said she used language that nobody in that congregation had ever heard come out of her before.”

The morning light shifted slightly in the room, and Peggy felt something she had not felt in a professional setting in a very long time: a prickling at the back of her neck. The same sensation she’d had once, years ago, reading a passage in Ezekiel. A sense of standing at the edge of something vast.

She looked down at the intake form. In the space for presenting concern, someone—probably Tamika, transcribing from Pastor Elias’s call—had written three words that now seemed to breathe on the page.

***“She is not herself.”***

## V.

Peggy had been a Christian for thirty-seven years and a counselor for twenty-two. In that time, she had heard the word “deliverance” spoken in hushed tones in church hallways, had read the accounts in the Gospels until they were familiar to her as her own address, and had even attended, in her early thirties, a weekend conference on inner healing and spiritual warfare that had left her simultaneously convicted and cautious.

She was not a skeptic. She believed the Bible in its entirety, which meant she believed in demons the same way she believed in the Holy Spirit—not as abstractions or metaphors, but as real and present and active in the world. What she had always been careful about was attribution. Not every destructive thought was demonic. Not every broken behavior indicated an invading presence. The human heart was capable of its own darkness, profound and sufficient, and a counselor who blamed the Enemy for everything healed nothing.

But she was not, she reminded herself, a skeptic.

She placed Lydia Crane’s folder in the two o’clock slot of her schedule and poured her first cup of coffee. She had three sessions before she would meet this woman, and she intended to be fully present for each one. Whatever Lydia Crane’s situation turned out to be—grief,

trauma, psychosis, spiritual crisis, or something else entirely—she would approach it the way she approached everything: with clinical rigor in one hand and the Word of God in the other.

She walked to her office, closed the door behind her, and stood for a long moment before her window, looking out at the marigolds.

Then she opened her Bible to the sixth chapter of Ephesians and read, slowly and deliberately, the passage she had read a hundred times before. But this morning, for reasons she could not entirely explain, the words did not feel like theology.

They felt like a briefing.

> *"Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand." — Ephesians 6:13 (NKJV)*

## VI.

The session with Doris Henley went well. The woman arrived exactly on time, which she always did, and sat in the same chair she always chose—the one closest to the window, as if she liked having one eye on the outside world. Today she spoke, for the first time, about her mother. Not with the careful distance she usually maintained, but with something raw and close and almost tender.

Peggy listened. It was the primary instrument of her work—not advice, not diagnosis, not the clever recalibration of cognitive distortions—but listening. The kind of listening that said: I am here, and I am not afraid of what you carry, and God sees you in this moment and loves what He sees.

When Doris left, there were tears on her cheeks and something lighter in her posture, and Peggy sat for five minutes in the quiet of her office and gave thanks.

Marcus Webb came in wearing his usual jeans and flannel, his jaw set, his eyes doing what they always did—scanning the room before he sat down, a habit the war had written permanently into his body. He talked today about the nightmares, which was progress, because last month he had refused to acknowledge they existed.

“I keep dreaming about Corporal Diaz,” he said, staring at the middle distance between himself and the wall. “He’s always trying to say something. I can never hear it.”

“What do you imagine he would say,” Peggy asked quietly, “if you could hear him?”

Marcus was silent for a long moment. Then, very quietly: “That it wasn’t my fault.”

The room held that like a cupped hand holds water.

After Marcus came the Kellermans, and after the Kellermans, lunch, which Peggy ate alone at her desk with her Bible open beside her plate, not reading so much as letting the words be near her.

At 1:47 in the afternoon, Tamika knocked and opened the door. “Lydia Crane is here, Dr. Walters. She’s…” A brief pause, the kind that carries information. “She’s early.”

## VII.

Lydia Crane was a small woman with dark eyes and fine-boned hands and the look of someone who had recently been through a weather system that had not yet fully passed. She was dressed neatly—a pale blue blouse, gray slacks, low-heeled shoes—and she sat in the waiting room with her handbag in her lap and her knees pressed together and her gaze fixed on a point somewhere on the floor between herself and the door.

Peggy introduced herself warmly and walked her back to the office. Lydia sat in the window chair—Doris’s chair—and folded her hands and looked at Peggy with an expression that was, on its surface, composed.

But behind the composure, something moved.

Peggy had learned, over the years, to trust what she perceived in the first moments of a session before words arrived to organize and obscure. She perceived now a quality in Lydia Crane that she had no immediate clinical name for. It was not depression, exactly. It was not mania. It was not the flat affect of dissociation or the frenetic energy of anxiety. It was something she could only describe, in the private language of her own spirit, as crowdedness. As if the small, neat woman across from her was somehow occupied by more than one presence.

She set the feeling aside—noted it, filed it, did not act on it—and began where she always began.

“Lydia, I’m so glad you came today. This is a safe place. Nothing you say here leaves this room. I want you to know that whatever brought you here, you’re not alone in it. Can you tell me a little about what’s been going on?”

Lydia looked at her hands. Then she looked up, and her eyes were clear and present and profoundly sad.

“I don’t know how to say this,” she began, “without sounding like I’ve lost my mind.”

“Say it anyway,” Peggy said gently. “We can sort out the rest together.”

Lydia drew a long breath. Outside, a car passed on Meridian Street. Somewhere in the building, a phone rang and was answered. The marigolds caught the afternoon light.

“Something is living inside me,” Lydia said quietly. “Something that is not me. And I need you to help me make it leave.”

The room was very still.

Peggy Walters held the woman’s gaze, and she did not flinch, and she did not dismiss what she had heard, and she did not immediately reach for a clinical framework to contain it. She simply breathed, and she prayed the wordless prayer that lives beneath all words, and she felt, with a clarity she could not explain, that her life had been moving toward this room, this woman, this moment, for a very long time.

The battle, she understood now, had already begun.

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*End of Chapter One*

## CHAPTER TWO

# *Shadows in the Waiting Room*

> *“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” — 1 Peter 5:8 (NKJV)*

## I.

Three days after Lydia Crane’s first session, on a gray and restless Tuesday morning in late September, a young woman appeared at the door of New Hope Counseling Center without an appointment.

She did not knock. She did not ring the small brass bell mounted beside the entrance for clients who arrived after hours. She simply stood on the porch with her hand flat against the door, as though she were reading the building through her palm, and waited until Tamika, passing through the foyer with an armload of folders, happened to glance through the sidelights and see her there.

Tamika opened the door.

Later, she would not be able to recall the exact moment her unease began. She would remember the girl’s appearance clearly enough: twenty-two or twenty-three years old, slight and pale, with dark hair that fell in unwashed ropes to her shoulders and eyes the particular shade of gray that looks like water before a storm. She wore a white dress that was too thin for the weather and no coat, despite the forty-eight-degree chill that had settled over Clarksburg overnight. Her feet, Tamika noticed with a slow, cold slide of concern, were bare.

“Can I help you?” Tamika asked.

The young woman looked at her. The look lasted a fraction of a second longer than was natural, and in that fraction Tamika felt something she would later describe to Peggy only as “like being looked at by someone standing behind her own face.”

“I need to see the counselor,” the girl said. Her voice was low and even, completely without affect, the way a voice sounds when the person using it is very far away from it. “The one who prays.”

## II.

Tamika brought her inside and settled her in the chair nearest the corner of the waiting room—the one with its back to the wall and a clear sightline to both doors, chosen not by deliberate calculation but by some instinct that Tamika would pray about later, in the privacy of her car. She offered the girl coffee, which was refused without acknowledgment. She offered water, which was also refused. She set a box of tissues on the table beside the chair, out of professional habit, and went to find Peggy.

Peggy was between clients. She was standing at her office window, as she often did in the spaces between sessions, letting her mind go still. She had a habit, rooted in something her mother had taught her before she had words to understand why, of releasing each session into God's hands before the next one arrived. It was a kind of spiritual hygiene, she had come to believe—a way of ensuring that she brought herself fully to each person rather than the accumulated weight of everyone who had come before.

She was in this state, this deliberate emptiness, when Tamika appeared in her doorway with an expression that Peggy had not seen on her assistant's face in four years of working together.

"There's a girl in the waiting room," Tamika said.

Something in those six words, or perhaps in the quality of the silence that followed them, told Peggy everything she needed to know about how Tamika felt about the situation. She set down her coffee cup.

"Walk-in?"

"Yes, ma'am. No appointment. No referral that I know of. She asked for 'the one who prays.'" Tamika folded her hands at her waist. "She's barefoot, Dr. Walters. And I don't think she has a coat."

Peggy was already moving toward the door.

## III.

The girl's name, she said, was Nora. Just Nora. When Peggy asked for a last name, the question was met not with hostility or evasiveness but with a kind of blankness, as though last names belonged to a category of things that no longer applied.

She was sitting in the corner chair exactly as Tamika had left her, except that at some point she had pulled her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around her shins, making

herself into a shape that was less like a young woman waiting for help and more like a creature conserving warmth. Her bare feet were pale and slightly blue-tinged at the toes. The white dress, Peggy could see now, had a tear along the left shoulder seam.

Peggy sat across from her in the chair she occasionally used for the waiting room—a wingback, comfortable and close without being crowding—and introduced herself in the same warm, unhurried way she introduced herself to every new person who walked through this door.

"My name is Peggy Walters. I'm one of the counselors here. I understand you'd like to talk."

Nora looked at her. Again, that sensation—not quite a look, not quite a study—more like an assessment. Peggy had spent twenty-two years learning to read faces, and what she read in this one defied her usual vocabulary. There was intelligence there, and pain, and something else that she could not immediately classify. Something that did not, in the plainest terms she could find, feel entirely human.

She noted the thought without acting on it. Filed it alongside what she had felt in Lydia Crane's first session.

She was keeping a file, she realized, in the back of her mind. A file she had no name for yet.

"How did you find us, Nora?"

A pause. Then: "I was told to come here."

"By whom?"

The girl's gaze drifted to the window. Outside, the gray sky pressed low over the oaks on Meridian Street. A crow landed on the porch railing and sat there, watching.

"I don't remember," Nora said. And then, with a precision that made the words feel like something cut from elsewhere and inserted: "But something else does."

## IV.

Peggy had a protocol for walk-in clients who showed signs of acute distress or instability. It involved a safety assessment, a brief intake conversation, and—when appropriate—a referral to emergency services or a psychiatric facility. She ran through the protocol in her mind now, checking each element the way a pilot checks instruments before takeoff.

But the protocol, she was discovering, had not been designed for this.

Nora was not manic. She was not visibly intoxicated. She displayed no grandiosity, no pressured speech, no flight of ideas. Her affect was flat, but not in the way of clinical depression—it was flat in the way a still pond is flat, with the suggestion of considerable depth beneath. When Peggy asked her direct questions, she answered them directly, without deflection or confusion. She knew what year it was. She knew where she was. She knew her own first name.

And yet.

There was the matter of the crow, which had not moved from the railing in eleven minutes. Peggy was not a superstitious woman and knew that crows were simply crows, but she noted it the way she noted everything—quietly, without conclusion.

There was the matter of the temperature in the waiting room, which had dropped by several degrees since Nora arrived. Tamika had appeared in the doorway twice now with a questioning look that Peggy answered with a small, reassuring nod that communicated more confidence than she entirely felt.

And there was the matter of what happened when Peggy leaned forward slightly and said, as gently as she knew how to say anything, “Nora, are you safe?”

The girl’s head tilted. Not like a person who has misheard a question, but like a predator triangulating a sound. The motion was small and precise and entirely wrong, and it lasted only a moment before Nora’s face smoothed back into its customary blankness. But Peggy had seen it, and something in her spirit went very quiet and very alert, the way the countryside goes quiet before a tornado.

“She’s not,” Nora said.

Not “I’m not.” Not “No.”

***“She’s not.”***

Third person. Present tense. Spoken in a voice that was not quite the voice that had said everything else.

## V.

Peggy excused herself for three minutes. She walked to her office, closed the door, pressed her back against it, and stood in the silence for exactly ten seconds with her eyes shut and her hands open at her sides.

Then she prayed. Not a long prayer—she didn't have time for a long prayer—but a real one. The kind that doesn't reach for eloquence because eloquence is a luxury and this was not a luxurious moment.

"Lord. I need to know what I'm dealing with. I need Your eyes and Your discernment and Your protection over this building and everyone in it. Show me what's real. Show me what's true. And whatever this is—I'm not doing it in my own strength."

She opened her eyes.

On the corner of her desk, where she had placed it that morning after her Scripture reading, her Bible lay open to the eighth chapter of Mark. She had not opened it to Mark—she had been in Ephesians for the past three weeks. She crossed the room and looked down at the page, and her eye fell on a passage she knew well but which now rose off the page with a clarity that felt like a hand on her shoulder.

> *"And when He had come out of the boat, immediately there met Him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, who had his dwelling among the tombs; and no one could bind him, not even with chains." — Mark 5:2–3 (NKJV)*

She stood very still.

Then she picked up the phone on her desk and called Pastor Gerald Hooper at Calvary Bible Church, the man she trusted more than any living person to speak plain truth in complicated moments. He picked up on the second ring.

"Gerald," she said, without preamble, "I need five minutes and then I need you to be praying."

"Tell me," he said, and his voice was steady as a table.

She told him. All of it: Lydia Crane three days ago, the girl in the waiting room now, the shift in her voice, the third person, the cold. When she finished, the line was quiet for a moment.

"Are you afraid?" Gerald asked.

Peggy considered the question honestly, the way she always did. "No," she said. "But I am serious."

She could hear the smile in his voice, and the prayer beneath it. “Go back in there,” he said. “I’ll be on my knees the whole time. Call me when it’s over.”

## VI.

When Peggy returned to the waiting room, Nora had not moved. The crow was gone from the railing. The temperature had not changed. These facts registered and were filed.

Peggy sat back down and took a quiet breath and looked at the young woman with the full, undivided attention that was her greatest professional gift—the kind of attention that says: I see you. Not the thing that is wearing you. Not the performance or the damage or the diagnosis. You.

“Nora,” she said, “I’d like to talk to you. To the real you. The part of you that came here today and asked for the one who prays.” She paused. “I think that part of you is very brave.”

Something shifted. It was almost imperceptible—a softening around the eyes, a slight release of tension in the shoulders—but in twenty-two years Peggy had learned to read the millimeter-language of the human body, and she read this.

The girl’s lips parted.

“I can’t always get to the front,” Nora whispered. Her own voice, this time—younger, thinner, threaded with exhaustion and something enormous and urgent. “It pushes me back. But I heard someone say your name. That you help people who are… that you know about the other kind of thing.”

“What other kind of thing?” Peggy said, softly, steadily.

Nora’s hands—which had been locked around her shins this whole time—loosened. She set her feet on the floor. She looked at Peggy with eyes that were now entirely her own, young and frightened and fiercely present, and she said the thing that she had walked barefoot through forty-eight degrees of morning to say.

“I’m not alone in my body. I haven’t been alone in my body for four months. And I don’t know what to do. And I’m so tired.”

Her voice broke on the last word.

Peggy reached across and took the girl's cold hands in both of her own, and held them the way you hold something precious that has nearly been lost, and she said, with a conviction that came from somewhere deeper than training and further back than experience:

"You came to the right place. And you are not alone anymore."

## VII.

The session lasted ninety minutes. What happened in those ninety minutes—the gradual coaxing of Nora's story, the intervals of disturbance, the moments of preternatural cold and the moments of heartbreaking clarity—Peggy recorded afterward in careful, precise clinical language that communicated the observable facts while gesturing, inadequately, at the deeper truth of what she had witnessed.

What the notes could not capture was the moment, forty minutes in, when Nora's voice dropped two full registers without transition and said, in a tone that was not Nora's tone, in a cadence that was not Nora's cadence, with a knowledge it should not have possessed:

"We know who you are, Peggy Walters. We know what you carry. And we are not afraid of your prayers."

The room dropped to silence.

Peggy did not recoil. She had been a soldier of Christ too long to recoil, though she felt the cold move through her like a current. She sat forward in her chair, and she looked at the thing that was wearing this young woman's face, and she answered it in the only language worth speaking.

"You may not be afraid of my prayers," she said, quietly and without performance, "but you are afraid of the One I pray to. And He is in this room."

What happened next took less than a second: a sound—not from Nora's throat but from somewhere inside the room, sourceless and low—and then Nora's head dropped forward and she began to weep with the clean, exhausted sobs of someone returned to themselves after a long absence.

Peggy kept hold of her hands and prayed quietly under her breath until the weeping slowed.

Then she got Nora a blanket from the supply closet, and a pair of the socks she kept in her bottom drawer for clients who came in from the cold, and she sat with her while Tamika brought tea, and she began the long and painstaking work of finding out who this child was and what had been done to her and what God intended to do about it.

## VIII.

That evening, after the last client had gone and Tamika had locked the front door and said goodnight, Peggy sat alone in her office for a long time.

She had called Pastor Gerald back, as promised. She had called her supervisor, Dr. Eleanor Marsh at the Virginia Board of Counseling, and had navigated that conversation with the careful precision of someone who knows that certain truths must be wrapped in certain language to survive institutional contact. She had made a follow-up appointment for Nora—who had given a last name now: Nora Ellison, of no fixed address, aged twenty-three, formerly of Richmond, Virginia—for Thursday morning.

She had done all the things that a competent, credentialed, careful professional does after an unusual session. And then she sat in the quiet and let herself feel the weight of the afternoon, because she believed that unexperienced feelings do not dissolve—they ferment.

What she felt was not fear. She wanted to be clear with herself about that, because self-deception in this territory could be dangerous. What she felt was a solemn, stone-solid awareness that she was standing at the beginning of something that was going to require everything she had—every clinical skill, every theological conviction, every year of prayer, every lesson she had ever learned about the difference between human brokenness and something that human brokenness alone could not explain.

She thought about Lydia Crane, who was coming back on Friday. She thought about Nora Ellison, sleeping tonight she didn't know where, in a body she didn't entirely occupy. She thought about the voice that had spoken from Nora's throat, and the thing it had said, and the fact that it had known her name.

She opened her Bible to the sixth chapter of Ephesians, as she had done three days ago, and read through the armor passage again. This time she did not read it as theology or comfort or even instruction. She read it as a soldier reads orders before moving out: with full attention, with serious intent, with the understanding that what comes next will not be theoretical.

Then she knelt beside her desk—on the carpet that bore the impressions of twenty-two years of the same act—and she prayed for a long time. For Nora. For Lydia. For the center and everyone in it. For wisdom and discernment and protection and the particular kind of courage that is not the absence of awareness but the decision to act anyway.

And for one more thing, which she whispered last, quietly, into the gathering dark:

"Lord, teach me what I don't know. I'm willing to learn."

She rose. She gathered her things. She drove home through the Clarksburg evening, past the lit windows of ordinary houses, thinking that behind each one a life was unfolding that the people inside it probably believed they understood.

She had believed that once too.

She was beginning to understand that the world was larger than she had known, and darker in certain corners, and that God had placed her—specifically, deliberately, by name—at the edge of one of those corners.

She was beginning to understand, with a clarity that was equal parts terror and purpose, that this was not a coincidence.

This was a calling.

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*End of Chapter Two*

## CHAPTER THREE

# *Whispers in the Darkness*

> *"The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" — Psalm 27:1 (NKJV)*

## I.

It began with the dreams.

Peggy had never been a woman who placed undue weight on the content of her sleeping mind. She believed in the sovereignty of God and the sufficiency of Scripture and the wisdom of maintaining a modest, calibrated skepticism toward experiences that could not be tested against either. Dreams, in her professional and theological understanding, were the brain's nocturnal housekeeping—sometimes meaningful, sometimes merely metabolic, rarely requiring the kind of interpretive gravity the charismatic wing of the Church tended to assign them.

She revised this position on the Wednesday night following her session with Nora Ellison.

She woke at 3:17 in the morning with the certainty that someone was standing at the foot of her bed.

There was no one there. She checked with the lights off and then with the lights on and then she walked every room of the house with the thoroughness of a woman who had spent two decades learning not to flinch from hard truths. Every door was locked. Every window was latched. The cat, a gray tabby named Ezra, was asleep on the armchair in the sitting room and had not been disturbed.

She stood in the center of her bedroom in her bathrobe and her bare feet on the hardwood and she said, aloud, into the empty room: "In the name of Jesus Christ, this space belongs to God."

The words did not echo. They landed solid and flat and true, the way truth does when it is spoken into a listening darkness.

She did not sleep again. She made coffee and sat at her kitchen table with her Bible and her journal and stayed there until the sun came up, writing down everything she remembered about the dream, which she would not record here because some things are better kept between a person and God. But what she wrote in her journal that morning, at the top of the page in her careful schoolteacher hand, was this:

> *Something has noticed me. I do not say this in fear — I say it as a clinical observation, the same way I would note a change in a client's presentation. Something has become aware that I am aware. This is, I believe, how it begins. Lord, let it begin on Your terms, not its own.*

She closed the journal. She showered and dressed and drove to the center in the thin gray light of early morning, arriving forty minutes before Tamika, and she unlocked the door and walked through each room and prayed over each one the way Dr. Houser had taught her to do when she first joined the staff, back when she had thought the practice was more symbolic than practical.

She did not think that anymore.

## II.

Thursday brought Nora Ellison back, as scheduled, at ten o'clock in the morning.

She arrived with shoes this time—canvas sneakers, too thin for the season but shoes nonetheless—and a borrowed denim jacket that hung off her narrow shoulders like a curtain on a narrow window. Someone had given her a meal; there was slightly more color in her face than there had been two days before, and she moved through the door with the careful deliberateness of a person navigating a world that had recently become unreliable.

Tamika brought her tea without being asked. Nora accepted it this time, wrapping both hands around the mug the way a shipwreck survivor holds something solid, and she looked at Peggy across the low table with eyes that were, this morning, entirely her own.

"It was quiet last night," Nora said, without greeting, without preamble. She had learned, apparently, that Peggy did not require the social architecture that most sessions opened with. "Quieter than it's been in a long time. I slept for six hours."

"How did that feel?"

"Like being a person again." The simplicity of it was devastating. "But it was there when I woke up. I could feel it before I even opened my eyes. Like a…" She searched for the word with the visible effort of someone translating from a language that has no good dictionary. "Like a pressure. Behind my eyes. It doesn't hurt. It's just— present."

Peggy had spent the previous forty-eight hours reading. Not the clinical literature—she had read that long ago—but the theological and historical accounts that her graduate training had treated as peripheral: the Desert Fathers on discernment of spirits, John Wimber on power evangelism, Neil Anderson on identity in Christ, and, most importantly, the Gospel accounts themselves, read slowly and without the protective gloss of familiarity. What struck her, reading

the deliverance narratives in Mark and Luke with fresh eyes, was how matter-of-fact they were. Jesus did not convene a committee. He did not write a referral. He addressed the unclean spirit directly, He commanded it to leave, and it left. The drama was real but the authority was absolute.

She was not Jesus. She knew that with precision and humility. But she served One who was, and that relationship, she was beginning to understand, was not merely theological. It was operational.

"Nora," she said carefully, "I'd like to understand more about how this started. Not what it feels like now—we'll get there—but the beginning. Do you remember a before?"

The girl's hands tightened around the mug.

"Yes," she said. "I remember everything about the before."

## III.

Nora Ellison had grown up in a churchgoing household in Richmond, Virginia—the second of four children, the quiet one, the one her mother called "the observer." She had graduated from high school with good grades and moderate ambition and enrolled at a state university intending to study social work, which she described with a sad and retrospective irony as "wanting to help people."

In her sophomore year, in the particular loneliness that university can produce—surrounded by people and yet profoundly unmoored from community—she had drifted from the faith of her childhood in the way that water drifts from a glass left in the sun: not all at once, and without drama, until one day you notice the glass is empty.

She had found, in that drifting, a group of students who met on Thursday evenings in an off-campus apartment and called themselves a circle. Not a coven, not a club—a circle. It had seemed, at first, exactly what she needed: community, ritual, a sense of connection to something larger than the grinding ordinary of lectures and dining halls and the performative sociality of campus life.

She paused here. Peggy waited.

"They did things I didn't fully understand," Nora said. "I told myself it was just… spiritual exploration. That's what they called it. They said all paths led to the same light. And I wanted to believe that because I missed—" She stopped. Started again. "I missed God. Even when I was

walking away from Him, I missed Him. But I couldn't go back to what I'd had, because it felt too small for what I was feeling. Does that make sense?"

"It makes a great deal of sense," Peggy said quietly.

"There was a night in April," Nora continued. Her voice had taken on the careful, measured quality of someone navigating the recollection of an accident: precise and distant and trembling just beneath the surface. "A ritual. They said it was an opening. An invitation to whatever forces wanted to work through willing vessels." She looked at her hands. "I was willing. I said yes. I said it out loud. They told me to say it out loud."

The room was very quiet.

"And something came," Peggy said. Not a question.

"Something came," Nora confirmed. "I felt it like—like something stepping into water beside you. Displacing. And I knew immediately that I had made a catastrophic mistake. But I didn't know how to undo it. I didn't know if it could be undone. I went home and I locked my door and I lay on my bed for three days and I couldn't eat and I couldn't sleep and I could feel it… settling. Like something moving furniture in a house that isn't yours."

Peggy breathed slowly. She recognized, with the twin instruments of her clinical training and her spiritual formation, several distinct things happening simultaneously in this narrative: genuine trauma, genuine theological error with genuine consequences, and underneath both of those—a young woman who had been looking for God in the wrong place and had found something that was not God but was not nothing either.

She also recognized something she had felt in the room two days before, and in her bedroom at 3:17 in the morning:

She was being listened to.

## IV.

It announced itself at twenty-three minutes past eleven.

Nora was mid-sentence—describing the months between the ritual and her arrival in Clarksburg, the slow erosion of her own voice, the increasing intervals of darkness—when she stopped. Not in the way people stop when they lose a word or gather a thought. She stopped the way a clock stops: all at once, mid-motion, leaving a silence with jagged edges.

Her posture changed. The subtle collapse of someone retreating inward, replaced by an upright stillness that was not Nora's stillness—too deliberate, too architecturally precise, like a building settling rather than a body.

Her eyes, which had been lowered, came up.

Peggy did not look away.

The air in the room shifted the way air shifts before lightning—a faint ionization, a drawing-in, as though the space itself were taking a breath. The temperature descended with a speed that was not attributable to any HVAC explanation Peggy could construct. And from somewhere beneath or behind or inside the room—from a location that her spatial reasoning could not map—came a sound that was not quite a sound: a low, continuous, almost sub-audible vibration, felt more in the sternum than heard with the ears.

Then the voice.

It was not Nora's voice. It occupied her vocal apparatus the way a storm occupies a house—using its structure, distorting its character, filling it with something it was not built to hold.

"You are very persistent, Peggy Walters."

The use of her name, again. Each time deliberate. Each time a statement of information—that it knew her, that knowing her was meant to be unsettling, that the knowing was a form of claim.

She had thought about this, since Tuesday. She had prayed about it and read about it and discussed it, carefully, with Gerald Hooper, who had thirty years of pastoral ministry behind him and had encountered three situations in his career that he would describe, privately and with precision, as genuine demonic manifestation. He had told her: "They use names to establish fear. Names are ownership language. Do not let it define the terms of engagement."

So she did not.

"I know my name," she said, steadily. "What I'd like to know is yours."

A pause. The vibration intensified slightly, then subsided.

"We have many names."

"Then give me one," Peggy said. "The one that belongs to what is speaking right now."

The silence that followed this lasted long enough for Peggy to draw two slow, deliberate breaths and fix her attention on the only true thing in the room: the God she served was present, and His authority was not contingent on anything this entity could say or do or claim.

When the voice came again, it was quieter. Lower. And in the quiet and the low, she heard something she had not expected to hear.

She heard resistance.

"Desolation," it said. A name like a verdict. A name that landed in the room and sat there, claiming space.

Peggy wrote it in the margin of her notepad without looking down and kept her eyes on the space where Nora's face was, and she said: "Desolation. I want you to hear me very clearly. You are speaking to a servant of Jesus Christ. And in His name, and by His authority, you will not harm this woman, and you will not harm anyone in this building, and you will answer truthfully when I speak to you. Do you understand?"

What happened next did not happen in the room.

It happened in Peggy.

A wave—not physical, not emotional in any ordinary sense, but real as weather—moved through her from sternum to spine. Not fear. Something older and fiercer than fear, and also something she recognized from the pages of every account she'd ever read, from Moses at the burning bush to Isaiah in the Temple to the disciples on the water: the bone-deep awareness of standing in the presence of something that is not neutral, in a moment that is not ordinary, under an authority that does not originate with the person who holds it.

She was trembling. She noted this. She did not stop.

## V.

What followed was not, by any clinical definition, a therapy session. It was not, by any neat theological definition, a deliverance. It was something in between—a first contact, a reconnaissance, a careful and costly negotiation of territory—and when it was over, when Nora surfaced back to herself with the gasping consciousness of someone breaking through water, Peggy sat with her for twenty minutes in ordinary human presence: talking quietly about small things, making sure she ate the crackers and apple slices Tamika brought without being asked, watching the color return to her face like tide returning to a shore.

After Nora left—accompanied to the door by Tamika, who had arranged quietly and without instruction for a woman from Calvary Bible Church to meet her outside and take her to a safe place to stay—Peggy went to the bathroom at the end of the hall and turned on the cold water and held her wrists under it for two minutes.

It was a grounding technique. She had taught it to dozens of clients. She had never needed it herself.

She looked at her face in the mirror above the sink. The woman looking back was fifty-four years old and had spent the morning in the company of something ancient and hostile, and she looked it. Not broken. Not undone. But marked, in some way that the mirror showed and she could not name, by the encounter.

"He who is in you," she said to her own reflection, because she needed to hear it said aloud by a human voice in a tiled room under fluorescent lights, in the plainest possible language, "is greater than he who is in the world."

First John four, verse four.

She had memorized it at nineteen, in a small Baptist church in Roanoke, in a pew beside her mother. She had not known, at nineteen, what she was storing it for. She knew now.

## VI.

That afternoon she drove to Calvary Bible Church and sat in Gerald Hooper's office for two hours.

Gerald was sixty-three and had the face of a man who had sat with a great deal of suffering and found, on the other side of it, not bitterness but ballast. He was a large man, broad-shouldered, with reading glasses that he was always losing and finding on top of his own head, and he had a habit of listening with his eyes closed that unnerved people who didn't know him and comforted people who did.

Peggy told him everything. She read from her notes. She described the voice, the name, the temperature, the vibration, the wave that had moved through her. She described the trembling and the wrist-running and the mirror. She described it all with the same careful precision she brought to clinical documentation, because precision was how she honored experience—her own and others'.

Gerald listened with his eyes closed until she finished. Then he opened them.

“You’re not in over your head,” he said. It was the first thing he said, and he said it with a directness that left no room for false comfort or false modesty. “But you’re close to the edge of what you should do alone. This isn’t a criticism—it’s geometry. You need a team around you.”

“What kind of team?”

Gerald leaned forward, his large hands folded on the desk. “Praying people. Mature believers who understand spiritual authority and are not going to panic or grandstand. Someone with experience in this specific territory—I know a man in Charlottesville, pastor named William Eze, Nigerian-born, has been doing deliverance ministry for twenty years with the kind of quiet competence that this work requires. And you.” He looked at her steadily. “Because God put you in front of these women for a reason, Peggy, and I don’t think He’s done with that reason yet.”

Peggy sat with this for a moment.

“I need to tell you something,” she said.

“Tell me.”

“I’m not afraid. And I want to examine that carefully, because I’m aware it could be arrogance. But I don’t think it is.” She paused, searching for the right language. “I think it’s… anchoring. I’m anchored to something that the thing in that room cannot touch. And I felt it this morning—as clearly as I’ve ever felt anything—that the authority I stood in was not mine. I was a vessel. A representative. And the representative matters less than the One being represented.”

Gerald was quiet for a moment. Then he said, with a gentleness that was also a kind of gravity: “That is exactly right. And it’s also exactly the point at which people in this work become dangerous to themselves—when they begin to trust the anchoring without maintaining the anchor. Prayer, Peggy. Constant, communal, specific prayer. Not just before sessions. During. After. At three in the morning when something stands at the foot of your bed.”

She looked at him. “You know about that?”

“It’s how it works,” he said simply. “You’ve crossed into their awareness. They’ll test the perimeter. The answer is not to reinforce the walls—the answer is to know Whose house you’re living in.”

## VII.

She called Pastor William Eze that evening from her kitchen table.

He answered on the third ring with a voice like deep water—calm and full and carrying, the kind of voice that has spent decades speaking things into existence that did not yet exist. She introduced herself and gave him a brief account of the situation, and he listened without interrupting, which she noted with gratitude.

When she finished, he said: “Gerald Hooper is a good man and a wise one for sending you to me. Tell me—what is your authority structure? Who prays over you?”

It was not a question she had been asked before, in precisely those terms. She thought about it honestly. “Gerald, primarily. My own church, Calvary. My daily prayer practice.”

“Good,” he said. “You understand that what you are encountering is real.”

“Yes.”

“You understand that the authority available to you is also real, and is greater.”

“Yes.”

“Then we are beginning from the right place.” He paused. “I will tell you what I tell everyone who enters this work for the first time with their eyes open: the darkness is not impressed by your knowledge of it. It is not moved by your sincerity or your training or your compassion, which are all good gifts. It is moved by one thing only, which is the name and the authority of Jesus Christ, wielded by someone who knows that the name does not belong to them but has been given to them, and who wields it accordingly. With humility and with absolute confidence. These are not contradictions.”

“No,” Peggy said softly. “They’re not.”

“I will come to Clarksburg,” he said. “When the time is right—when these women are ready, and when God says to move. Until then, you are the person in the room. Do not go in without prayer cover. Do not go in alone. And do not ever—” His voice dropped slightly, not for drama but for emphasis, the way a doctor lowers his voice to ensure a diagnosis is heard clearly. “Do not ever engage out of curiosity. Only engage when the engagement serves the freedom of the one who is bound. The moment you begin to find this interesting rather than redemptive, you have lost the thread. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” she said.

And she did.

## VIII.

That night, Peggy did something she had not done since her mother's death six years ago.

She called her sister.

Her sister's name was Ruth—younger by three years, a schoolteacher in Staunton, a woman of robust and uncomplicated faith who read her Bible every morning and believed in healing prayer and had never once, in Peggy's memory, asked God for something and been surprised when He answered. Ruth was not a theologian. She had no graduate training in anything. She was simply, profoundly, and entirely a woman who knew who she belonged to, and that knowing was a quality of presence that Peggy had been taking for granted for forty years.

She called Ruth at eight-thirty and talked for an hour. She did not tell her everything—some of it was confidential, and some of it was not Ruth's to carry—but she told her enough. She told her that she was in the middle of something hard and important and real. She told her that she needed someone praying who would not complicate the prayer with too many questions. She told her that she loved her.

Ruth said: "I've been praying for you since Tuesday. I didn't know why. I just felt like you needed it."

Peggy was quiet for a moment on her end of the line.

"Tuesday," she said.

"All day Tuesday and then again at three in the morning. Which I know is strange, but—"

"It's not strange," Peggy said. Her voice was steady. Her eyes were not. "It's exactly right. Thank you, Ruthie."

She hung up the phone and sat in the kitchen for a long time with the lights on and the Bible open on the table and Ezra the cat warm and indifferent in her lap, purring with the absolute serenity of a creature that has no concept of spiritual warfare and is thereby exempt from it. She envied him slightly. She was also grateful not to be him.

She thought about Nora Ellison sleeping in a safe place tonight. She thought about Lydia Crane, who was coming back tomorrow. She thought about the name Desolation sitting in her notebook like a stone, heavy and specific and real.

She thought about what it meant that God had placed two women carrying the same kind of darkness in front of the same counselor in the same week. She did not believe in coincidence. She had spent too long watching God work to believe in coincidence.

She thought about calling.

Not a calling to counseling—she had answered that one long ago. This was something else. Something more particular and more costly. The kind of calling that does not come with a job description but announces itself in the accumulation of specific, undeniable circumstances: a barefoot girl on a porch, a name spoken in a voice that was not human, a sister praying at three in the morning without knowing why.

She opened her journal to a new page. At the top, in her careful hand, she wrote the date. Below it she wrote one line:

> *I think I am being trained. I think this is what that looks like.*

She closed the journal. She checked the locks. She went to bed.

At 3:17 in the morning—exactly, as though something kept a precise and deliberate schedule—she woke again.

This time she did not check the rooms. She did not turn on the lights. She lay in the dark and she felt the presence at the foot of her bed, testing the perimeter the way Gerald said it would, and she said, quietly and without theater, into the dark above her:

"This house belongs to Jesus Christ. You have no claim here. Go."

The presence withdrew. Not all at once—like a tide rather than a door—but it withdrew.

She slept.

And in the morning, when she woke, she felt something she had not expected to feel. Not relief. Not residual fear. Not even simple peace, though peace was present.

She felt ready.

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# CHAPTER FOUR
# *The Hidden Stronghold*

> *"For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God."*
> *— 2 Corinthians 10:4–5 (NKJV)*

## I.

The word stronghold had been part of Peggy's theological vocabulary for thirty years. She had read it in Paul's letters, heard it in sermons, used it herself in the occasional conference talk she gave on integrating faith and clinical practice. It was a word she understood the way a person understands a word they have never been required to apply under pressure: correctly, in the abstract, with the confidence of someone who has not yet been tested on the material.

In the second week of October, the word acquired a weight it had not previously carried.

It began with a conversation that Peggy had not sought and had not anticipated, in the unlikely setting of the New Hope Counseling Center's small break room, on a Tuesday afternoon when the rain was coming down in curtains against the windows and the center smelled of wet umbrella and fresh coffee and the particular stillness that descends on a building between appointments.

Lydia Crane had arrived fifteen minutes early for her Friday session—Peggy had rescheduled it to Tuesday at Lydia's request—and Tamika had settled her in the waiting room with tea. But Lydia had not stayed in the waiting room. She had wandered, with the unfocused purposefulness of someone moving under direction they cannot fully articulate, to the break room at the back of the building. Tamika had found her there standing in front of the window with her hands at her sides and her tea untouched on the counter, staring at the rain with an expression that was equal parts desolation and recognition, as though the rain were telling her something she already knew.

Tamika had come to get Peggy immediately. Not because Lydia was doing anything alarming. Because of her eyes.

"They were somewhere else," Tamika said, in the hallway outside the break room, in a voice that was professionally steady and privately shaken. "Like she was there but also not there. And her lips were moving. I couldn't hear what she was saying."

Peggy nodded. She squared her shoulders the way she had been squaring them, with increasing deliberateness, every day for two weeks. And she went in.

## II.

Lydia's session that day lasted two hours and forty minutes.

It was not, in its outward texture, as dramatic as what Peggy had witnessed with Nora Ellison. There was no voice shift, no sub-audible vibration, no cold that moved through the room like a current. Lydia remained Lydia—present, coherent, achingly self-aware—for the duration of the session. What made the two hours and forty minutes significant was not what happened in the room but what was revealed in it: a history that Peggy had begun to understand was not merely personal, but structural. Not just Lydia's story. A story that had been building for generations.

It came out in pieces, the way deeply buried things always do—not excavated cleanly but surfacing in fragments, each one requiring the others to make full sense. Peggy listened and took careful notes and asked precise, unhurried questions, and by the time Lydia left—looking wrung out and somehow lighter, the particular combination that Peggy had come to recognize as the body's response to having finally said a true thing out loud—Peggy had before her a picture that was, in its comprehensiveness, both deeply sad and deeply clarifying.

She sat at her desk for a long time after Lydia was gone.

Then she opened a new section of her clinical notebook and began, in her careful, precise hand, to map what she had heard.

### CASE NOTES — LYDIA CRANE

*Compiled: Tuesday, October 8 | Session Duration: 2 hrs 40 min*

**FAMILY HISTORY:** *Paternal grandmother, Esther Crane (d. 1991), practiced divination and folk healing in rural West Virginia. Community regarded her as a 'root*

*worker.' Client describes her as frightening, secretive, commanding. Grandmother introduced client's father to occult practices in childhood.*

**PATERNAL LINE:** *Client's father, Harold Crane, engaged in Freemasonry to degree level client cannot specify. Also reports her father kept objects in the home she was forbidden to touch or ask about. She describes a locked cedar box beneath his workbench. He referred to these objects as 'the family's protection.'*

**CLIENT'S OWN HISTORY:** *At age 14, client participated in a Ouija board session at a friend's home. Reports feeling 'chosen' by whatever responded. At age 19, was approached by a woman in her church's prayer group who offered to teach her 'deeper spiritual gifts.' Accepted. Instruction included automatic writing, spirit contact, and what the woman called ancestral dialogue. Client continued these practices intermittently for six years before her marriage.*

**MARRIAGE AND CONVERSION:** *Client married David Crane (age 27) at age 26. David is a committed Christian; his faith was a significant factor in client's formal conversion three years later. Client reports she stopped all occult practices at time of conversion but did not, by her account, renounce them explicitly or seek spiritual counsel about prior involvement. 'I just put it down and walked away. I thought that was enough.'*

**ONSET OF CURRENT SYMPTOMS:** *Approximately eight months ago, following death of paternal aunt (Margaret Crane, the last of her father's generation). Client attended the funeral and handled objects from the aunt's estate. Symptoms began within two weeks: intrusive thoughts, episodes of dissociation, compulsion to return to former practices, voice in church during worship that is 'not my own thinking.'*

**CLIENT'S OWN ASSESSMENT:** *'I left the door open. I've always known I left the door open. I just hoped it would stay closed on its own.'*

Peggy set down her pen.

She had been a counselor for twenty-two years and a student of human beings for longer than that, and she knew the difference between a person constructing a narrative and a person reporting a history. Lydia Crane was reporting. Every detail was offered with the flat, factual precision of someone who has been carrying an inventory for a long time and is finally, carefully, setting the items on the table one by one.

She looked at what she had written and she thought about the word stronghold, and for the first time in thirty years the word was not abstract.

## III.

She called Pastor William Eze that evening.

He listened to her summary of Lydia's history in the focused silence that she had already come to understand was his primary mode of engagement—not passive, not absent, but the silence of a man sifting what he hears against what he knows, which was considerable. When she finished, he did not speak immediately. She could hear, faintly, what she believed was rain on a window in Charlottesville, two hours south.

"Generational," he said at last. The word landed in the conversation the way a stone lands in water—with a small, precise sound and then widening circles.

"That was my assessment," Peggy said.

"The grandmother was the originating point. The root worker. You understand what that means in practical terms."

"I believe so. She opened something. An invitation. And it has been accepted by successive generations, either actively—as with the father—or passively, as with Lydia."

"And reinforced," Eze said. "This is the part that is difficult to explain to people who have not encountered it. The Enemy is patient in a way that human beings rarely appreciate. A legal claim established in 1955 by a grandmother in West Virginia is still a legal claim in 2024 in the life of her granddaughter—unless it is specifically, consciously, and spiritually renounced. It does not expire. It does not become irrelevant simply because the person has changed religions or changed behavior. The door that was opened must be deliberately, specifically, in the name of Christ, shut."

Peggy wrote this down, word for word, because she understood that she was being given instruction that she would need to be able to repeat with precision.

"And the objects?" she asked. "The cedar box. The aunt's estate."

A pause. "Do you know what Lydia handled when she settled the estate?"

"Not specifically. I'll ask."

“Ask carefully,” he said. “And ask whether any of those objects came home with her. Objects consecrated to dark purposes carry a spiritual residue. This is not superstition. This is consistent with what Scripture teaches about dedicated things—you will find the principle in Deuteronomy and in Joshua, in the account of Achan and the devoted goods. The physical and the spiritual are not as separate as Western theology has sometimes preferred to believe.”

Peggy thought of the locked cedar box beneath the workbench. Thought of a fourteen-year-old girl watching her father and learning what the family’s protection looked like.

“I need to understand something,” she said. “For my own clinical grounding. What Lydia is experiencing—is it oppression or possession? I ask because the treatment pathway is different, and because the distinction matters for what I tell her she is and is not.”

Eze was quiet for a moment. “Opression is pressure from without. Possession—or more accurately, demonization—is inhabitation from within, to varying degrees. What you have described with Lydia suggests a significant level of demonization, particularly in the domain of her thought life and her volitional capacity. There are moments when she is herself and moments when she is not. This is not the same as a psychotic episode, which I know you know, but I say it because the distinction will matter when you speak to colleagues. A psychotic patient cannot choose when to be present. Lydia can feel the difference, which tells us that her own will is still engaged, which tells us that full deliverance is possible.”

He paused. “It also tells us that she must choose it. We cannot deliver someone who does not wish to be free. The will is the door. Christ does not force it.”

## IV.

Nora Ellison’s Thursday session produced a parallel revelation.

Nora had been staying, for the past week, with a woman named Carol Briggs—a deacon’s wife from Calvary Bible Church who had opened her spare bedroom with the matter-of-fact generosity of someone who had been doing this sort of thing for thirty years and considered it unremarkable. Under Carol’s roof, with regular meals and regular prayer and the quiet anchor of someone who was not afraid of her, Nora had stabilized in a way that her intake presentation had given Peggy no reason to expect so quickly.

She arrived on Thursday looking like a young woman who had slept and eaten and been spoken to with consistent kindness, which was what she was. She sat in the window chair with both feet on the floor and her hands open in her lap—not the closed, self-protective posture of

the first session, but something more available—and she looked at Peggy with eyes that were, this morning, entirely and steadily her own.

"I want to understand what happened to me," she said, before Peggy had spoken. "Not just what it feels like. The actual mechanism. I'm a person who needs to understand things."

"That's a good instinct," Peggy said. "Understanding is part of the path out. Let's start at the beginning. Not April—before April. Tell me about your family."

What emerged over the next hour was quieter than Lydia's history but no less significant. Nora's mother, she explained, had been a practicing New Age spiritualist—not the diluted, crystals-and-affirmations variety, but a committed practitioner of channeling and spirit communication who had raised her children in what she called an open spiritual household. There were rituals. There were invitations—the word again, deliberate and weighted—offered regularly and routinely to whatever entities wished to engage.

"I grew up thinking it was normal," Nora said. "The same way some kids grow up thinking church is normal. It was just… what our family did on Tuesday evenings. Mom called them guests." She paused. "I didn't know they weren't."

"When did you begin to question it?"

"When I was fifteen. A friend took me to her youth group. The pastor talked about Jesus in a way I'd never heard anyone talk about anything—like He was actually real, like knowing Him was an actual possibility rather than a metaphor. I went home and told my mother and she…" Nora's jaw tightened slightly. "She said that Jesus was one of many teachers, and that the guests didn't appreciate exclusivity, and that I should be careful about closing doors."

The word doors sat in the room between them.

"She used that word," Peggy said carefully. "Doors."

"She used it a lot. Keeping doors open. Honoring all thresholds. It was…" Nora thought for a moment. "It was the household language for spiritual access. For maintaining relationship with whatever came when you called."

Peggy wrote: "Generational open door — maternal line. Childhood initiation through household practice. Consent given through normalized exposure."

Beneath that she wrote: "Nora grew up in a house where the guests were always welcome."

And beneath that: "She never had the chance to close what was never hers to open."

## V.

That Saturday, Peggy drove to Charlottesville.

She had not been asked to. The drive was her own decision, made on Friday evening after a long prayer session that had left her with the clear, clean sense of a next step—not a grand strategic movement but a single, practical action. She needed to sit across from William Eze in a room, not across from him on a phone line. Some things require physical presence to transmit correctly.

He met her at the door of his church—a modest brick building on a side street near the university, called Redeemer's House—with a handshake that was also a kind of assessment, and led her to a small study lined floor-to-ceiling with books in four languages and smelling of old paper and strong coffee. He was a compact man in his late fifties, with close-cropped gray hair and reading glasses on a cord around his neck, and he moved through his space with the unhurried authority of someone who had spent decades knowing exactly who he was and who he served.

She laid everything on the table. Both cases, in full. The complete histories, the manifestations, the sessions, her own 3:17 wakings, the name Desolation, her conversations with Gerald, her research. She laid it out the way a carpenter lays out tools before beginning work—methodically, without drama, because drama was not useful here and she had never had patience for it.

Eze listened. He asked three questions during the full hour of her account, each one precise and clarifying, landing in exactly the right place in the narrative. When she finished, he rose and went to one of the shelves and returned with two books, which he set on the table between them.

The first was a slim volume on ancestral sin and generational curses by a theologian she recognized. The second was a worn, unmarked notebook—his own, she understood, filled with years of case observations in small, dense handwriting.

"You have two women," he said, "who arrived at the same door by different roads. Lydia through inheritance—she was born into an open house and never fully closed it. Nora through invitation—she walked through a door that her upbringing had conditioned her to find familiar and welcoming. The presenting manifestations differ. The root mechanism is the same: a legal claim, established through explicit spiritual transaction, that has not been revoked."

“A legal claim,” Peggy said. “You’ve used that language before.”

“Because it is the most accurate language available to us. The spiritual realm operates according to principles—authority, consent, covenant, jurisdiction. When a human being opens a door to a spiritual entity—whether through deliberate occult practice, inherited dedication, or uninstructed participation in rituals of invitation—they have, in the language of that realm, executed a contract. They have granted access. The access does not self-terminate simply because the person’s circumstances or beliefs change. It must be legally—spiritually, covenantally—revoked.”

“Through renunciation.”

“Through renunciation, through repentance, through the explicit application of the blood and authority of Christ over every point of entry. Specifically. Named. Dated, where possible. The generality of ‘I renounce all sin’ is insufficient. The specificity of ‘I renounce by name this practice, this event, this object, this relationship’ is what closes the door.”

Peggy thought of Lydia’s words in the session: “I just put it down and walked away. I thought that was enough.”

“It wasn’t enough,” she said, mostly to herself.

“It is almost never enough,” Eze said, not unkindly. “Because the Church has not taught these things. We have taught conversion without completion. We have taught people to leave Egypt without teaching them to close the gate behind them.” He folded his hands. “This is not condemnation. It is diagnosis. And diagnosis is the beginning of healing.”

## VI.

They spent the afternoon building what Eze called a map of entry points—a structured theological and historical inventory of every identifiable moment in each woman’s history where spiritual access had been granted.

For Lydia: the grandmother’s practice and its dedication of the family line; the father’s Freemasonry and the objects of power kept in the home; the Ouija board at fourteen; the six years of active occult practice in her twenties; the objects handled at the aunt’s estate. Five primary doors. Possibly more beneath them.

For Nora: the household practice from childhood, beginning before the age of conscious consent; the formal participation in the circle’s ritual in April; the explicit verbal invitation.

Three primary doors, but the first was deep—so deep it predated her own memory and therefore her own choice—and deep doors required careful, patient work.

"The question you must ask yourself before we move to the next stage," Eze said, setting down his pen, "is whether both of these women have come to genuine Christian faith, or whether they are seeking relief without transformation."

Peggy considered this with the seriousness it deserved. "Lydia is a Christian. Her faith is real—I've watched it operate under significant pressure in our sessions. She knows who she belongs to. The bondage she's in is not a statement about her salvation. It's the consequence of doors that were opened before and after her conversion and never properly closed."

"And Nora?"

A longer pause. "Nora is coming to faith. She is not there yet. But something in her—the part that walked barefoot through forty-eight degrees to find the one who prays—that part knows where life is. She is moving toward it."

Eze nodded slowly. "Then we proceed with Lydia first, when she is ready. She has the foundation for the work. For Nora, we continue to build the foundation while providing the support and stability she needs. We do not attempt deliverance on a person who has not surrendered to the One in whose name we speak. The authority requires the vessel's consent."

He paused. "And Peggy—"

"Yes."

"You must also do this inventory for yourself. Not because I believe you are carrying what they carry. But because in this work, the enemy will look for any crack in the vessel. Your own history, your own entry points, your own unclosed doors—you must know them. You must have dealt with them. You cannot lead someone to freedom through territory you yourself have not cleared."

She held his gaze. "I understand."

"Good. Then go home, and spend this week in that inventory. Be ruthless and be honest. Bring it to Gerald. And then we begin."

## VII.

The drive back to Clarksburg took two hours and twelve minutes. Peggy spent the first thirty miles in silence, which she had learned to treat as a form of prayer—not the articulate, petitionary kind, but the kind that is simply an orientation of the whole self toward God, a turning of the face.

After thirty miles she turned on the radio, found a station playing hymns—a Saturday afternoon program from a small Christian broadcaster she had listened to since her twenties—and drove through the October hills with the music filling the car and the trees burning gold and red on either side of the highway, and she let herself feel, for the first time since this had begun, the full complexity of what she was carrying.

Not fear. She kept arriving at this same destination when she took the honest inventory: not fear.

What she felt was weight. The specific, non-metaphorical weight of having been entrusted with something that mattered enormously—two women's lives, two women's freedom, two women's relationships with the God who had made them and loved them and had not, she was increasingly certain, sent them to her by accident.

She felt also the edges of her own ignorance, which was a different kind of weight. She was a trained counselor and a serious Christian and a woman of genuine prayer, but she was new to this particular territory and she knew it. Eze had twenty years here. Gerald had thirty years in pastoral ministry. She had three weeks and two clients and the growing conviction that God does not call people to things He does not also equip them for, provided they remain humble enough to be equipped.

That last condition, she suspected, was the difficult one.

She thought about what Eze had said about her own inventory. She turned it over in her mind the way you turn over an object in dim light, trying to see all of its faces. She was not a woman who had explored the occult or walked in deliberate sin. Her life had been, by any reasonable accounting, marked by faithfulness and care and the genuine pursuit of God.

But she was also a woman who had been through a divorce, seventeen years ago, that she had never fully grieved or fully surrendered. A woman who carried, in a compartment she rarely opened, a wound inflicted by a pastor she had trusted and who had used that trust in a way that had left a scar on her relationship with spiritual authority that she had patched over rather than healed. A woman who, in the early years of her counseling career, had sat with a client she had known was deteriorating and had not escalated, and had lost him, and had carried that quietly for a decade.

These were not occult entry points. But they were unclosed rooms.

And Eze had said: the enemy will look for any crack in the vessel.

She drove into Clarksburg as the last of the afternoon light was leaving the hills, and she went home, and she fed Ezra, and she sat at her kitchen table with her journal open and a cup of tea going cold beside it, and she began the hardest inventory she had ever undertaken. Not of her clients' histories.

Of her own.

## VIII.

She wrote for three hours.

She wrote about the divorce and what she had believed in the dark years of it and what she had allowed those beliefs to do to her understanding of her own worth and God's faithfulness. She wrote about the pastor—she had not written his name in any document for nine years—and she wrote it now, because Eze had said specificity, and she honored that even when it cost her. She wrote about her client, whose name was Daniel, and the session she had not escalated, and the way she had constructed, in the years since, a elaborate interior architecture of justification that had allowed her to carry the grief without examining it.

She wrote, in short, the truth about herself. Not the curated professional truth that appears in c.v.s and conference bios and the warm introductions of supervisors who admire her work. The actual truth. The truth that God already knew and that she had been carrying in those unclosed rooms for longer than she had wanted to admit.

When she finished, she sat for a long moment with her hands on the closed journal.

Then she opened it again, to the last page she had written, and she went through it line by line, and at the end of each entry she wrote four words that she had been taught, long ago, were not merely devotional language but operational spiritual reality:

***"I repent. I renounce. I close this door in the name of Jesus Christ."***

She said the words aloud as she wrote them. Each entry. Each name. Each wound. Each lie she had believed and each door she had left standing open in the private architecture of her own soul.

It took another hour.

When she was done, she was not crying. She was not undone. She was something she could only describe as scoured—the way a surface looks after something long encrusted on it has been carefully, thoroughly removed. Raw, perhaps. But clean.

She closed the journal.

She looked at the window, where the night had fully arrived, and she said the last thing she said each evening before she slept, which was the same thing she had said each evening for thirty-seven years, since the night at nineteen when she had first understood what it meant to belong to Someone:

"You are Lord of this house. You are Lord of this life. There is no part of me that is not Yours."

She went to bed.

She slept through the night.

At 3:17 in the morning, nothing came.

She noted this, in the morning, with a quiet and precise gratitude that was also, in its way, a kind of proof. Not proof she had needed. But proof she received, with both hands open, as the gift it was.

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*End of Chapter Four*

## CHAPTER FIVE

# *The Enemy Revealed*

> *"Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith." — 1 Peter 5:8–9 (ESV)*

> *"And the Watchers called them Nephilim, and terror went before them; for their dominion was established in darkness, and in darkness they sought to remain." — 1 Enoch 7:6 (R.H. Charles translation)*

## I.

There are moments in a person's life that function as a before and after—a line drawn by circumstance across the calendar of their experience, so that everything on one side belongs to one version of themselves and everything on the other belongs to the version that emerged from the crossing. Peggy Walters had had three such moments before October the fourteenth: her conversion at nineteen, her divorce at thirty-seven, and the death of her mother at forty-eight. Each had remade her, in its own fashion, into something more precisely herself.

The fourth moment came on a Monday.

She had been at New Hope for eleven hours. The morning had been ordinary—three sessions, a phone consultation with a referring physician, a staff meeting about the center's intake procedures that she had led with the competent distraction of someone whose mind is operating on two levels simultaneously. The afternoon brought Lydia Crane at two o'clock, and it was in Lydia's session that the before and after announced itself—not gradually, not with the slow accumulation of evidence that had characterized the previous weeks, but with the sudden, irrevocable clarity of a mask falling.

She would think about it afterward in those terms. A mask, falling. Because what she saw that afternoon was not a new thing—it had been present in every session, in every manifestation, in every temperature drop and voice shift and sourceless vibration. What changed on October the fourteenth was that the mask fell, and what was behind it looked directly at her, and she saw it fully, and she did not look away.

And in seeing it, she understood something that twenty-two years of clinical training and thirty-seven years of faith had been building, separately and together, to the point where she was able to receive it without being destroyed by it:

She understood what she was fighting.

## II.

Lydia arrived looking worse than she had in three weeks.

The previous two sessions had shown incremental but genuine improvement—more color in her face, more steadiness in her bearing, more of the Lydia that her husband David had described in his one brief call to the center: a woman of dry humor and fierce intelligence and deep maternal warmth. That Lydia had been surfacing in fragments, like a landscape emerging from fog, and Peggy had been documenting the emergence with the careful hope of someone who has learned not to count progress until it holds.

Today the fog was back. Thicker than before.

Lydia sat in the window chair with her arms crossed tight over her chest and her gaze moving in the unfocused, slightly roving pattern that Peggy had come to associate with the presence operating close to the surface. She was dressed, but barely—a shirt buttoned wrong, hair uncharacteristically loose, shoes that did not match. She had not, Peggy understood at once, chosen any of this herself this morning. Something else had dressed her and driven her here, and the question of why settled into Peggy's mind like a stone into water.

Why had it brought her?

She filed the question and began the session.

> *"For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." — 2 Timothy 1:7 (NKJV)*

Peggy opened as she always opened: calmly, warmly, with the focused attention that said: I am here and I am not afraid and you are safe in this room. She asked Lydia how she had slept. The answer was four words, delivered with the flatness of a weather report: "I didn't, really." She asked about the weekend. Three words: "I don't remember."

She asked: "Lydia, is Lydia present with me right now?"

A silence. Then, from somewhere behind the flat gray surface of the woman's eyes, a flicker—brief and desperate as a candle in a draft.

"She's here," Lydia said. Her own voice, thin and tired. "But it's very loud today. It's been… it's been very loud since Friday."

"What happened Friday?" Peggy asked.

The flicker wavered. “I prayed.” A pause, and in the pause, something moved. “I prayed and I meant it. I asked God to—to start closing the doors. The way you and I have been talking about. And it—it heard me. And it’s been angry since.”

Peggy absorbed this with the careful steadiness of someone who has been preparing for exactly this information. She had read it in every account, heard it from Eze, understood it theologically: the countermove. The Enemy, when it senses a challenge to its territory, does not retreat quietly. It presses. It escalates. It attempts to overwhelm the person’s resolve through sheer intensity before the process of freedom can gather momentum.

She had read it. She had understood it.

She was about to live it.

## III.

The shift came at fourteen minutes past two.

Lydia had been speaking—carefully, in her own voice, with the effortful concentration of someone fighting for each sentence against an opposing current—about the act of prayer she had attempted on Friday. She described kneeling beside her bed, the way she had been taught as a child and had abandoned and returned to. She described saying the words that Peggy had given her: the renunciation formula, specific and named, covering the entry points they had mapped together. She said she had felt, for the first time in eight months, something she could only call relief—a lightening, brief and real.

And then she said that the relief had lasted eleven minutes.

After eleven minutes, something else had begun.

She was mid-sentence, describing it, when her speech stopped. Not tapered off. Stopped. Her mouth closed. Her hands, which had been moving in the small, expressive gestures that were characteristic of the real Lydia, went still. Her eyes, which had been alive with the effort of communication, went flat.

The temperature in the room dropped.

Peggy sat forward in her chair. She placed both feet flat on the floor—a grounding practice, both physical and spiritual—and she breathed one slow breath and she said, in the

level, authoritative tone that was not performance but intention: “In the name of Jesus Christ, I address whatever is present in this room. You are not in control here. This is holy ground.”

What happened next she would record in her clinical notes with clinical language. She would describe it to Gerald and to Eze with theological language. But in the privacy of her journal, that evening, she would write it in the only language that was fully adequate to what she had seen:

> *It looked at me. Not through Lydia’s eyes — not using her eyes as a vehicle. It looked at me through its own gaze, which occupied her face the way darkness occupies a room when the light is extinguished. I have spent weeks trying to find the clinical language for what I have been seeing, and I am setting that language aside for this entry because what I saw today was not a dissociative episode and it was not a psychotic break and it was not a conversion disorder. It was a person — if person is even the word — who had been hiding behind Lydia Crane’s face, and who chose, today, to stop hiding. And it was the most frightening thing I have seen in fifty-four years of being alive. I want to write that with complete honesty, without softening it, because the truth of how frightening it was is also the truth of how real it was. And the truth of how real it was is the ground on which everything I do next must stand.*

## IV.

The entity did not speak immediately.

It looked at her for what Peggy estimated was forty-five seconds—an interval that, under these conditions, had the elastic quality of much longer—with an expression that she could only describe as appraisal. The way a general looks at a battlefield before deciding how to deploy. The way a chess player looks at a board in the middle of a game that has not yet been decided.

Then it smiled.

The smile used Lydia’s face and had nothing of Lydia in it. It was a smile shaped by a knowledge of what smiles do to human beings—the unsettling effect of a familiar expression on an unfamiliar face—and it was deployed with the cold precision of a tool.

Peggy did not flinch. She had been praying silently and continuously since the moment the shift occurred, the words running beneath her visible composure like a current beneath still water: Lord, let Your authority stand in this room. Let Your protection cover this woman. Let Your name be the only name that matters here.

> *"The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe." — Proverbs 18:10 (ESV)*

When the entity spoke, it did not use the low register she had heard in Nora's session. It used Lydia's full voice—clear, articulate, unmistakably hers in timbre—which was, Peggy understood, deliberate. A cruelty dressed as normalcy. The horror of hearing someone you have come to care for speak words they would never speak.

"You have been busy," it said.

"Yes," Peggy said.

"Building your little map. Your entry points." A pause weighted with something that was almost amusement. "You think you understand what you are looking at."

"I think I understand enough," she said. "I know what you are. I know the authority under which I stand. And I know that your time in this woman is limited."

The smile again. "We have been in this family for seventy years, Peggy Walters. Seventy years of open doors and willing vessels and legal right, as your friend from Charlottesville would say. You think your little map closes that?"

The knowledge of Eze landed in the room. Another demonstration: it knew. It had been listening. It had access, she understood with cold clarity, to everything that had been spoken in proximity to Lydia Crane—every session, every phone call, perhaps every prayer.

She did not allow this to move her.

"I think the blood of Jesus Christ closes that," she said. "Which is why you're speaking to me now instead of staying hidden. You are speaking because you are afraid of what comes next."

A silence.

In the silence, something changed in the room's atmosphere—a subtle shift in pressure, like the moment before a storm breaks. Peggy felt it in her chest, in her ears, in the back of her throat. She kept her feet flat on the floor and her hands open on her knees and her gaze steady on the face of the woman across from her.

The entity spoke again. Quieter now. And in the quiet, she heard what she had heard once before and recognized again: resistance. Not the resistance of something unafraid. The resistance of something that very much did not want to say what it said next.

"Legion," it said. And then, before she could process the weight of that single word: "We are many."

> *"And He asked him, 'What is your name?' And he answered, 'My name is Legion, for we are many.'" — Mark 5:9 (NKJV)*

## V.

Peggy had read the fifth chapter of Mark so many times that she could recite its arc from memory. The Gadarene demoniac—the man among the tombs, the chains he could not be bound with, the wounds he inflicted on himself, the voice that called itself Legion and begged not to be cast out of the region. She had read it as history, as theology, as case study, as a window into the nature of demonic oppression.

She had not read it as a script she would one day find herself inside.

She breathed. She prayed. She kept her voice level.

"How many?" she asked. Not from morbid curiosity—she heard Eze's voice in her memory: only engage when the engagement serves the freedom of the one who is bound—but because the information was operationally necessary, and because asking the question was itself a demonstration of authority. You are subject to my questions. You are not conducting this session.

The entity did not answer the number. Instead it said: "Enough. We have been gathering in this line since before this woman's mother was born. Each generation that opened the door added to what came through it. Do you know what it is to be invited? To be welcomed?" The voice carried something that was nearly yearning and was more precisely a parody of yearning—a mimicry of emotion deployed to produce discomfort. "The grandmother knew how to welcome us. She understood the old ways."

> *"And the spirits which had gone forth from the souls of men made desolate— they shall afflict men and trouble them, until the great judgment. They shall corrupt the sons of men and the daughters until the day of the great consummation." — 1 Enoch 15:11–12 (R.H. Charles translation)*

Peggy let the words settle without receiving them. She had been instructed, by Eze, on exactly this tactic: the long history recited as a claim of permanence, the suggestion that longevity confers legitimacy. It did not. Seventy years of illegal occupancy was still illegal occupancy.

"You were invited by someone who had no right to issue that invitation," Peggy said. "And every generation since has either repeated the invitation without understanding what they were saying, or been handed open doors they never chose. The legal claim you are describing is built on coercion and inheritance and deception. And in the name of Jesus Christ—"

The reaction was immediate and physical.

Lydia's body stiffened. Her hands, which had been resting open, closed into fists. Her head dropped forward and then came back up, and the expression on her face was no longer the cold appraisal of before but something rawer, something that had in it the quality of an animal that has felt the net tighten.

"Do not," it said. Lower. Urgent in a way that was not human urgency. "Do not speak that name."

"Jesus Christ," Peggy said again, clearly and without hesitation, because the instruction to stop was itself the evidence of the name's power, and she would not honor the instruction. "The name above every name. Before whom every knee shall bow—in heaven and on earth and under the earth. You know this name. You know what it means. And you know that you cannot remain where it is spoken in authority."

> *"Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth." — Philippians 2:9–10 (NKJV)*

What followed lasted approximately seven minutes and Peggy would not record it in detail anywhere except the private journal that she kept under lock and in the complete account she gave to Eze the following morning. What she would say, when asked, was that it was not quiet and it was not subtle and it left no room for any remaining doubt about the nature of what she had been dealing with for the past three weeks.

She would also say that it did not destroy her, which she considered the more significant fact.

## VI.

At some point during the seven minutes, Tamika had heard the noise—she would later describe it as "a sound I don't have a word for, like something tearing but not physical"—and had come to the door. Peggy had held up one hand without looking away from Lydia, and Tamika, who trusted Peggy with an absoluteness born of four years of working together and an instinct sharper than most, had stayed in the doorway and begun praying quietly in the way that she prayed when she meant it, which was with her whole body and without self-consciousness.

This, Peggy would think afterward, mattered. The prayer cover mattered. The moment Tamika began praying in the doorway, something in the room shifted. Not resolved—she was not equipped to conduct a full deliverance alone, and she knew it, and she was not going to attempt one. But the atmosphere changed. The pressure that had been building since the moment the mask fell eased, fractionally, the way a room eases when a window is opened.

She said, into the easing: "In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to be still. I do not command you to leave today—that time is coming, and it will be complete—but I command you to be still, and to release this woman back to herself. She is a daughter of God, bought with a price, and you have no final authority over her. Be still."

> *"Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price." — 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 (ESV)*

The stillness that followed was not the stillness of compliance—not entirely. It was the stillness of something retreating behind its cover, the way a soldier retreats to a fortified

position when the field becomes untenable. But it retreated. And in the retreating, Lydia surfaced.

She came back to herself in stages: the fists unclenching first, then the shoulders dropping from their rigid elevation, then the eyes clearing, the gaze reconnecting, the breath coming in the deep unsteady gulps of someone who has been underwater. She looked at Peggy across the table with the eyes of the real Lydia—frightened and exhausted and wholly, recognizably present.

"I heard it," Lydia said. Her voice shaking. "I was inside. I could hear it speaking. I could hear you." Her hands came up and covered her mouth. "I heard what it said about my grandmother. About the seventy years."

"I know," Peggy said gently. "I know you did."

"Is it true? Has this been—has my family—"

"Lydia," Peggy said, with a steadiness that was also a kindness, "the truth of your family's history is not a verdict on you. You did not choose what was opened before you were born. And what can be opened can be closed. That is why you're here. That is what we are going to do."

Lydia lowered her hands. Her chin was set. In the set of it, Peggy saw the woman David Crane had described—fierce, intelligent, unwilling to be defeated by anything that could be faced.

"Then let's do it," Lydia said. "I'm not—I won't live like this. I won't."

## VII.

Tamika brought tea. She also brought, without being asked, the small bottle of anointing oil she kept in her desk drawer—not because anyone had taught her this was the protocol but because she was a woman who understood that some moments require the physical alongside the verbal, and she had been in the doorway long enough to understand what kind of moment this was.

Peggy took the oil with a nod of gratitude and set it on the table.

She did not anoint Lydia today. That would come later, in the full session with Eze, with proper preparation and proper prayer cover. But she held Lydia's hands across the table and she spoke over her the things that needed to be spoken: identity, authority, covering. That she

was known by name in heaven. That the God who had made her had not abandoned her to this. That the blood of Christ was not a theological abstraction but a living, operational reality that had legal standing in the same spiritual realm where the entity she had just encountered also operated.

> *"And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death." — Revelation 12:11 (NKJV)*

Lydia listened with the focused attention of someone receiving information that her life depends on, which was accurate.

When Peggy finished, she asked Lydia to do one thing before she left: to say aloud, in whatever words came naturally, that she wanted to be free. Not a formula. Not a liturgy. Just the true statement of her own will, spoken into the air of the room.

Lydia was quiet for a moment. Then she straightened in her chair and she said, in a voice that was shaking but clear—in a voice that was entirely and irreducibly her own:

"I want to be free. I choose freedom. And I am choosing it in the name of the only One who has the authority to give it to me, which is Jesus Christ. Whatever has been in my family, whatever I have carried, whatever was opened before I understood what opening meant—I am done with it. I am choosing something different. I am choosing Him."

The room held that declaration for a moment.

And then something happened that Peggy did not put in her clinical notes and did not describe to Eze with theological language and did not attempt to explain to anyone who had not themselves stood in a room where the presence of God had settled like light into a space that had been occupied by something else.

The room became warm.

Not the warmth of the HVAC system correcting for the cold that had preceded it. The warmth of a presence. The warmth of a Person. The kind of warmth that Peggy had felt once before in her life, on the night of her conversion at nineteen, and had been living toward ever since.

She did not explain it. She received it. And she watched Lydia Crane receive it too—the widening of her eyes, the slow loosening of everything that had been drawn tight for eight months, the tears that came not from grief but from the overwhelming recognition of being seen and claimed and held.

> *"The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound." — Isaiah 61:1 (ESV)*

## VIII.

Lydia left at four-seventeen in the afternoon.

David Crane was waiting in the parking lot. He had been waiting since three-thirty, Tamika said—he had called to check on his wife and Tamika had, with the precise instinct of someone who understood the moment, told him to come. He got out of the car when Lydia came through the door, and he crossed the parking lot in a few strides and put his arms around her, and Lydia held onto him the way people hold onto things when the storm has passed and the ground is still solid and the fact of solidity is newly, fiercely remarkable.

Peggy watched from the window.

Then she turned back to her office and sat down, because her legs had decided, with reasonable justification, that they had earned a rest.

Tamika appeared in the doorway. She had a cup of tea and the expression of someone who has participated in something they do not yet have the full language for but know was significant.

"Are you all right, Dr. Walters?"

"Yes," Peggy said. And then, because Tamika deserved the truth: "I am shaken and I am certain and I am more grateful than I know how to say. Which is, I think, exactly the right combination of things to be."

Tamika set the tea on the desk and nodded. "I'll lock up," she said. "You stay."

She was alone for an hour.

She spent it partly in prayer and partly in stillness that was itself a form of prayer and partly in the careful documentation of everything she had seen and heard, because documentation was the discipline of her profession and she would not abandon it simply because the material resisted its usual categories. She wrote what had happened in Lydia's session the way a surgeon writes an operative note: precisely, in sequence, without editorial comment, with the understanding that accuracy now would serve someone later.

When she finished the notes, she opened her Bible to the book of Ephesians—the sixth chapter, as she had done so many evenings now that the pages fell open there of their own accord—and she read the armor passage once more. But tonight she read it differently than she had in September, differently than she had read it two weeks ago, differently than she had ever read it in thirty-seven years of faith.

She read it as a soldier reads orders after the first engagement.

Not as preparation for a battle she had not yet seen.

As guidance for one she was already in.

> *"Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one." — Ephesians 6:14–16 (NKJV)*

She drove home through the October dark with the heater running and the radio off and the particular quality of silence that follows a significant event—not empty silence but full silence, the silence of a room where something true has been said and is still resonating.

She thought about Lydia's declaration. I choose freedom. The way it had sounded. The way the room had changed.

She thought about Legion. She thought about seventy years. She thought about a grandmother in West Virginia who had opened a door in 1954 or thereabouts and about the long, patient damage that had followed through three generations, and she felt, alongside the grief of that, a fierce and fully-lit anger that was not her anger alone but something she recognized as righteous—the anger of One who had made these women and loved them and had

watched this happen and had been waiting, with the patience of eternity, for someone to show up and say: enough.

She thought: I am that person.

She did not think this with pride. She thought it with the sober weight of someone who has just understood the full scope of the assignment they accepted when they answered a calling twenty-two years ago—when they sat in a supervisor's office in Liberty University and said: I want to help people. I want to see them free.

She had meant it then.

She meant it now with her whole body and her whole history and every prayer she had ever prayed and every verse she had ever stored and every morning she had knelt beside her desk and said: Lord, let me be useful today.

He had been preparing her for this her entire life.

And she had arrived.

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End of Chapter Five

## CHAPTER SIX
# *Armor of Light*

> *"The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light." — Romans 13:12 (NKJV)*

> *"And I heard the voice of the holy ones, the sons of heaven, saying: 'You are mighty, O Lord, in your power, and there is none who can withstand you.' And the righteous shall be victorious,*

> *and they shall call upon the name of the Lord." — 1 Enoch 84:3 (R.H. Charles translation)*

## I.

In the days following the confrontation with Legion, Peggy Walters did something that her training had taught her to do and that her nature had occasionally caused her to resist: she stopped working alone.

It was not a comfortable decision. She was a woman who had built her professional life on the foundation of competence—on the quiet, earned confidence of someone who had sat with the darkest rooms of the human psyche for twenty-two years and had not been broken by any of them. She was not arrogant about this. But she was, she admitted to herself in the honesty of her morning prayers, accustomed to being the most capable person in the room when it came to the work of human healing. She knew her limits in other domains. In this one she had rarely had to know them.

The events of October the fourteenth had taught her, with the efficiency of a very direct teacher, that this domain was not the one she had been working in.

What she had been doing for the past month—the sessions with Nora and Lydia, the consultations with Eze, the conversations with Gerald, the private inventory and the 3:17 mornings—had been preparation. Good preparation, necessary preparation, but preparation nonetheless. What came next was not preparation. What came next required a team.

She understood this the way she understood most important things: through prayer first, and then through the steady accumulation of evidence that confirmed what prayer had already told her.

> *"For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them." — Matthew 18:20 (NKJV)*

She began making calls on Tuesday morning, two days after the session. She had a list, written in her journal the night before, of the people she trusted enough to bring into this—not merely trusted as friends or colleagues, but trusted in the specific and costly sense that this work required: trusted to pray with authority, to operate without ego, to maintain confidence

with the discipline of people who understood that they were handling another person's dignity as well as their spiritual crisis, and to not panic or grandstand when the work became strange.

It was a short list.

She had learned, from Eze, that a short list was correct. A long list meant you were gathering an audience. A short list meant you were assembling a team.

## II.

The first call was to Gerald Hooper, who was already praying and said so.

"I've been in Ephesians six since Monday morning," he said, when she described the session. "Tell me what you need."

What she needed, she explained, was for him to serve as the spiritual authority covering of the team—not as the primary minister in the deliverance sessions themselves, since that role would belong to Eze, but as the pastor who held the broader spiritual accountability for what was happening. Someone with eldership standing and decades of prayer behind him who could be called at any hour and who would hold the whole situation before God with consistent, informed intercession.

"You're asking me to be the anchor," Gerald said.

"Yes."

"I've been anchoring things since 1991. Yes." A pause. "I want to say something to you, Peggy, before you go further into this."

"Say it."

His voice dropped to the register it used when he was about to say something that mattered. "You have been walking toward this for your whole life. I've known you for nine years and I have watched you become, without ever intending it, precisely the person that this work requires. You have the clinical training to distinguish pathology from the spiritual. You have the theological formation to stand in authority without manufacturing authority you don't possess. You have the prayer life to sustain it. And you have—" He paused. "You have the particular quality of compassion that keeps this work from becoming a performance. You genuinely love these women. That matters more than you know. The Enemy fears love the way it fears the name of Christ—because love is the operating principle of the One who defeated it."

Peggy was quiet for a moment on her end of the line.

“Thank you, Gerald,” she said.

“Don’t thank me,” he said. “Pray. And call me anytime.”

> *“And above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.” — Colossians 3:14 (NKJV)*

## III.

The second call was to William Eze, who had been expecting it.

“I heard about Monday,” he said, before she could explain. She did not ask how. There were things about William Eze’s discernment that she had stopped requiring explanations for.

“Then you know it’s time,” she said.

“It has been time for a week. Lydia’s declaration on Monday created the opening. The moment a person makes a genuine, volitional declaration of freedom in the name of Christ, the ground shifts. The legal claim is contested at the highest level. The entity knows this—which is why it will attempt to press harder in the days between now and the session. It will attempt to reverse the declaration through fear and confusion and physical distress. You need to prepare Lydia for this.”

“I was planning to meet with her tomorrow.”

“Good. Tell her what to expect. Give her Scripture to hold onto—specific verses, written out, that she can speak aloud when the pressure increases. The spoken Word is not decorative in this context. It is a weapon.”

> *“And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance.” — Ephesians 6:17–18 (NKJV)*

“I’ll come to Clarksburg on Saturday,” Eze said. “We will meet together first—the team—before we meet with Lydia. I want to pray with everyone who will be in the room. I want to know them in the Spirit before we go in together.”

“How many people should be in the room?”

He considered this. “For the deliverance itself: you, me, one intercessor with genuine authority—someone who can hold the prayer covering without becoming a distraction. If your assistant has what I think she has, she is that person. And a physician or nurse present outside the room in case of physical need, because bodies respond to this work and we honor the physical as well as the spiritual.”

“I know a nurse from Calvary,” Peggy said. “Marjorie Tate. She’s prayed over more people than most pastors.”

“Bring her,” Eze said. “And Peggy—no observers. No learners. No one who is there primarily because they want to see what happens. Everyone in that room must be there for Lydia. The moment the focus becomes anything other than her freedom, the atmosphere changes. We cannot afford that.”

“Understood,” she said. She had already known this. It was good to hear it said.

## IV.

She met with Lydia on Wednesday at ten o’clock.

Lydia arrived with David, which Peggy had suggested—not because she required him in the session, but because she had found, in the past three weeks, that Lydia’s stability was meaningfully anchored by her husband’s physical proximity, and the preparation conversation they were about to have would be easier if that anchor was present. David was a quiet man—a civil engineer with the careful, systematic thinking of his profession and the steady, undemonstrative faith of someone who had built his relationship with God the way he built everything: one load-bearing piece at a time. He sat beside his wife and held her hand and listened with the complete attention of a man who has understood that the most useful thing he can do right now is exactly that.

Peggy explained what was coming with the honesty that the situation required and the compassion that Lydia deserved. She explained that what they had encountered in Monday’s session—the entity, the voice, the claim of Legion—was not the end of the engagement but its

beginning. She explained that a full deliverance session was being arranged, led by Pastor William Eze, and that its purpose was to complete what Lydia's own declaration had begun: the systematic, specific, authoritative closure of every door that had been opened in her family's history.

She explained what might happen before Saturday.

"The days between now and the session may be difficult," she said. "What you're experiencing may intensify. Not because the process is failing—but because it's succeeding. Your declaration on Monday contested a claim that has been standing for seventy years. The response to that contest will be pressure. Intrusive thoughts. Possible nightmares. A sense of heaviness or dread, particularly in the early morning hours."

Lydia was nodding slowly. "It started last night," she said. "I woke at two in the morning and I couldn't—I couldn't find the words to pray. Like something was sitting on my chest and on my tongue at the same time."

"I know," Peggy said. "Here is what I want you to do." She handed Lydia a folded piece of paper—handwritten, in Peggy's careful schoolteacher hand, eight Scripture verses she had selected the previous evening after two hours of prayer and consideration. Not general comfort passages. Specific, operative, authoritative declarations.

**SCRIPTURE FOR LYDIA — SPEAK THESE ALOUD**

*"The spoken Word is a weapon. Use it." — P.W.*

> *"No weapon formed against you shall prosper, and every tongue which rises against you in judgment you shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD." — Isaiah 54:17 (NKJV)*

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

> *"The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" — Psalm 27:1 (NKJV)*

> *“Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.” — 1 John 4:4 (NASB)*

> *“For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” — Romans 8:38–39 (NKJV)*

Lydia read the page slowly. David read it over her shoulder. When she looked up, her eyes were full but her jaw was set in the way Peggy had come to recognize as her truest face: determined and clear and entirely unwilling to be defeated.

“Speak them out loud,” Peggy repeated. “Not in your head. Aloud. In your own voice. The spoken declaration of truth into a space that is claiming to be governed by something else is not theatrical—it is territorial. You are establishing, in audible, physical, real-world terms, who has authority in your body and your home. Your voice matters. The words must be spoken.”

“What if I can’t get them out?” Lydia asked quietly.

“Then David reads them over you. His voice in your defense is the same authority.” She looked at David. “You are her covering. That is not a metaphor. If she cannot speak, you speak for her. Is that clear?”

David Crane looked back at her with the steady eyes of a man who has just been given a job he understands exactly and intends to do exactly. “Clear,” he said.

## V.

The third person Peggy called was Tamika.

She called her not to her office but to the break room, on Thursday morning before the first client arrived, with two cups of coffee on the table between them and the particular quality of morning light coming through the rain-washed window that made the room feel set apart

from the rest of the day. She told Tamika, without omission, what she was assembling and why, and what Tamika's role in it would be, and what that role would require.

Tamika listened with her hands around her mug and her eyes steady and her face doing the thing it did when she was processing something serious: very still, very present, a slight tightening at the corners of her mouth that was not displeasure but concentration.

When Peggy finished, Tamika was quiet for a moment.

Then she said: "I've been praying about this since that first Tuesday. Since before I knew what I was praying about. I just knew something was coming into this building that was bigger than our usual work, and I started praying for the building and the people in it and you specifically, every morning when I unlocked the door."

Peggy looked at her. "Every morning?"

"Every morning. Since the girl with the bare feet."

The girl with the bare feet. Tamika had a way of naming things that captured them completely.

"Pastor Eze said he wants you in the room," Peggy said. "Not outside. In the room, as the intercessor. That means you'll be praying continuously, throughout the session, in whatever way the Spirit directs you. You won't speak unless you're asked to or unless you feel specifically directed to. But you'll be holding the prayer covering over the whole of it."

Tamika nodded once. It was not the nod of someone accepting a new assignment. It was the nod of someone recognizing the assignment they had already been given.

"One thing I need to ask you," Peggy said.

"Ask."

"This will not be like anything you've experienced in a prayer meeting or a church service. What you saw in the doorway on Monday—that was a fraction of what the full session may involve. I need to know that you are anchored in your own faith deeply enough that what happens in that room will not shake the foundation. I am not asking whether you'll be afraid. Fear is reasonable. I am asking whether your faith is load-bearing."

Tamika looked at her across the coffee cups with the expression of a woman who has been asked a question that she has been answering her whole life.

"Dr. Walters," she said, "I grew up in a Pentecostal household in rural Georgia. My grandmother cast out a spirit from my uncle at the kitchen table when I was nine years old. My faith is not decorative."

Peggy smiled. It was the first time she had smiled, she realized, in four days. It felt like stretching a muscle she had forgotten she had.

"Good," she said. "Then we have our team."

> *"And in those days the prayers of the righteous ascended into heaven before the Lord, and He heard them and answered." — 1 Enoch 47:1 (R.H. Charles translation)*

## VI.

Marjorie Tate arrived at New Hope on Friday afternoon at Peggy's request, ostensibly for a cup of coffee that lasted two hours.

She was sixty-one, a retired emergency room nurse with the kind of competence that had been forged in environments where competence was not optional, and a faith that had been forged in the same environments for the same reason. She had seen people die and she had seen people healed, and she had long ago made her peace with the territory where medicine could not follow and prayer stepped in. She was a short woman with close-cropped silver hair and reading glasses on a chain and the hands of someone who had spent forty years using them to help people, and she wore these credentials not as identity but as tool, the way a good craftsperson wears their skills: available, specific, without ornamentation.

Peggy told her what she needed.

"Physically," Marjorie said, when she finished, with the directness of the clinical, "what should I expect?"

"Possibly nothing. Possibly elevated heart rate, elevated blood pressure, hyperventilation, physical exhaustion consistent with extreme emotional distress. Possibly—" Peggy chose her words carefully, "possibly things that don't have an easy clinical category. Strength that is not consistent with the person's size or condition. Movements or responses that are not voluntary. Physical temperature changes in the body itself."

Marjorie absorbed this without comment. “And you’re asking me to be the person who monitors the physical while the rest of you handle the spiritual.”

“Yes. You’ll be outside the room but immediately available. If I need you, Tamika will come to the door.”

“And if what I’m seeing needs a hospital?”

“Then we stop and we call one. The physical body is not a casualty of this work—it is the person we are trying to free. We honor it accordingly.”

Marjorie nodded slowly. She picked up her coffee cup and looked into it for a moment, with the expression of someone taking a private inventory. Then she looked up.

“I’ve prayed for people in trauma bays at two in the morning when there was nothing left to do medically,” she said. “And I’ve watched things happen in those moments that I could not put in a chart. I am not naive about the reality of what you’re describing. I’ll be there.”

“Thank you, Marjorie.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” she said, with a dry humor that reminded Peggy, briefly and with warmth, of the real Lydia Crane. “Wait until it’s over.”

## VII.

On Friday evening, Peggy drove to the church.

Not Calvary Bible—her own church, the smaller one, Grace Fellowship, on the east side of Clarksburg where she had been a member for fourteen years. She went not for a service—there was none on Friday evening—but because she needed to be in the building. She let herself in with the key she kept on her ring between her house key and her office key, and she walked through the dark foyer into the sanctuary, and she sat in the third pew from the front on the left side, where she always sat, where the wood was worn smooth by fourteen years of the same habit.

She sat in the dark for a long time. Not praying, exactly. Being. Present in a place that had been consecrated by decades of worship and weeping and prayer and bread and cup and the repeated, humble, congregational act of showing up and meaning it. The air of the sanctuary had a quality that she had never found anywhere else and had no scientific explanation for and

had stopped needing one: it felt inhabited. Not by anything frightening. By something permanent and old and entirely benevolent.

She had needed to feel that tonight.

After a while she opened her Bible, using her phone's flashlight rather than disturbing the darkness of the sanctuary with the overhead lights. She turned to the passage she had been living in for weeks. But tonight she did not read the armor passage. She turned earlier, to the beginning of the chapter, and read the verses she had been treating as context rather than content.

> *"Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." — Ephesians 6:10–11 (NKJV)*

Be strong in the Lord. Not in your training. Not in your experience or your theology or your courage or your carefully constructed team. In the Lord. In the power of His might, which is not yours but has been given to you as a gift with conditions attached: humility, obedience, faith, and the willingness to remain, no matter what the room looks like, a vessel rather than an authority.

She sat with this for a long time.

Then she prayed—not for the session, not for Lydia, not for the team. She prayed for herself. For the particular kind of grace that would allow her to walk into a room on Saturday morning and be, before she was anything else, a servant. For the cleansing of anything in her that wanted credit or recognition or the satisfaction of having been right about what she had seen. For the death of her professional ego, which was subtle and stubborn and dressed itself in the respectable clothing of competence.

She prayed for thirty minutes.

When she rose from the pew, she felt the way she had felt in her office after the long inventory—scoured. And underneath the scouring, something else. Something she recognized from the night of her conversion at nineteen, and from every significant moment of obedience since: the particular, quiet, unperformable peace of a person who has set down everything they

were carrying that was not theirs to carry and is standing upright under only the weight that belongs to them.

She locked the church behind her. She drove home through the Friday night streets of Clarksburg. She fed Ezra, who received his food with the dignified ingratitude of a cat who considers punctuality a minimal expectation rather than a courtesy.

She wrote one entry in her journal:

> *Tomorrow we go in. I am not afraid. I am not unafraid. I am past both of those things. I am simply ready — which is, I think, what obedience looks like from the inside when it has been fully surrendered. Not excitement. Not dread. Just: yes. I said yes to this calling twenty-two years ago in a room at Liberty University. I am saying it again tonight in my kitchen with the cat on my lap and tomorrow I will say it again in a room in Clarksburg, Virginia, in the company of people I trust who trust the same God I trust. And whatever happens in that room — whatever we see, whatever we face — He goes in first. He is already there. And He has never, in fifty-four years of my life, failed to be sufficient.*

She closed the journal. She set her alarm for six. She turned off the light.

## VIII.

Saturday came in clear and cold, the sky the particular shade of October blue that looks like it has been washed overnight and hung out to dry. The trees along Meridian Street had given themselves over entirely to their turning—the oaks burning copper, the maples incandescent in shades of red and gold that Peggy had always believed were God showing off, which she considered entirely appropriate.

She arrived at New Hope at seven-thirty.

Tamika was already there. She had arrived at seven, she said, because she had been awake since five and praying since five-fifteen and it had seemed inefficient to be praying at home when she could be praying here, in the building, over the room they would use. She had placed a small bottle of anointing oil on the table in the session room, alongside a Bible opened to Psalm 91, and a glass of water, and a box of tissues, and a blanket folded on the chair—not because any of these had been requested, but because Tamika understood, with the deep

practical intelligence of genuine faith, that the body needs to be honored alongside the spirit in moments of significant crisis, and that honoring it begins with preparation.

> *"He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, 'He is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in Him I will trust.'" — Psalm 91:1–2 (NKJV)*

Gerald Hooper arrived at eight. He walked through the center with the unhurried authority of a man who has been in prayer for twelve hours and is simply continuing it in a different location. He shook Peggy's hand and held it for a moment longer than a handshake, which was a laying on of something—she received it without naming it.

William Eze arrived at eight-fifteen, driving a ten-year-old silver sedan that had a worship CD in the player and a prayer journal on the passenger seat and a worn leather Bible on the dashboard that Peggy suspected had not moved from that spot in years. He got out of the car and stood in the New Hope parking lot for a moment and looked at the building with the expression of a man reading something, and then he looked at the sky, and then he came inside.

He greeted each person by name and looked at each person in turn with the focused, assessing attention that Peggy recognized from their first meeting in Charlottesville—the look of someone checking not credentials but condition, not background but readiness. He spent three extra minutes with Tamika, asking her two quiet questions that Peggy was not close enough to hear, and whatever Tamika answered, it satisfied him.

Marjorie Tate arrived at eight-thirty with a medical bag and a thermos of tea and the composed, practical bearing of someone who has spent her career walking into rooms where something difficult was about to happen and who has never once found it useful to be anything other than ready.

They gathered in the break room—the same room where Lydia had stood at the window in the rain three weeks ago, the beginning of all of this—and Eze led them in forty-five minutes of prayer that Peggy would later describe, inadequately but honestly, as the most significant prayer meeting she had attended in fifty-four years of being alive.

It was not loud. It was not theatrical. It was the prayer of people who knew exactly who they were addressing and exactly what they were asking for, spoken into a room that became,

over those forty-five minutes, the most thoroughly holy space Peggy had stood in outside a sanctuary.

When it was over, Eze looked around the circle of them.

"We are ready," he said. Not as an encouragement. As an assessment. "And we are not the ones who will do this work. We are instruments. The work belongs to God, and the victory belongs to Christ, and our role is to show up faithfully and hold the space open for what He intends to do in this woman's life. Is that understood by everyone?"

Yes, around the circle. Each voice different. Each voice certain.

At nine o'clock, Lydia Crane's car turned into the parking lot of the New Hope Counseling Center.

David was driving. Lydia sat in the passenger seat with her hands in her lap and her face turned toward the building, and even from the window where Peggy stood watching, even across the parking lot and through two panes of glass, she could see it: the set of Lydia's jaw, the straightness of her spine, the expression of someone who has been afraid for eight months and has decided, this morning, that she is more done with the fear than she is afraid of what ending it will cost.

Peggy turned from the window.

She gathered herself, as she had gathered herself every morning of her professional life—the faith, the training, the prayer, the love—and she walked down the hall to meet Lydia at the door.

The armor was on.

The battle was about to be joined.

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*End of Chapter Six*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# *The Legion's Resistance*

> *“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.” — Ephesians 6:12 (NKJV)*

> *“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.” — Revelation 13:1 (KJV)*

## I.

In the second week following Lydia Crane’s deliverance session—which had been, by every measure Peggy possessed, the most extraordinary day of her professional and spiritual life—the center began to change.

It was not a dramatic change. It did not announce itself. It accumulated the way weather accumulates—a degree of pressure here, a shift in light there, small anomalies that could be explained individually and could not be explained collectively. Peggy had spent enough time now in the company of things that did not yield to ordinary explanation to recognize the pattern: something was responding. Something had watched what happened in the session room on that October Saturday, and it had drawn conclusions, and it was adjusting its strategy accordingly.

She did not say this to anyone immediately. She documented it. She prayed over it. She called Eze on Thursday evening and described what she was observing, carefully and in sequence, and he listened without interrupting for eleven minutes and then said, with the specific gravity that had come to mean he was about to say something she needed to write down:

“When a stronghold falls, the garrison does not disband. It disperses. What was concentrated in one place becomes distributed. You have won a significant engagement, Peggy. But you have also announced your position, your capability, and your authority. The response to that announcement is not retreat. It is coordination.”

She wrote that word: coordination. She underlined it twice.

She looked at her client list and she began to see it—the way you see a constellation once someone has drawn the lines for you: suddenly obvious, and afterward impossible to unsee.

> *"Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour." — 1 Peter 5:8 (NKJV)*

## II.

The first anomaly had appeared during an ordinary Tuesday session with a client Peggy had been seeing for eight months: a man named Raymond Okafor, forty-six, a high school history teacher who had come to the center originally for grief counseling following the death of his wife. Raymond was a thoughtful, measured man—a churchgoer, a reader, a man whose faith was genuine but wore the particular shape of someone who had worked it out intellectually before he had worked it out in the bones. He had made steady progress. He had been, until recently, one of the uncomplicated bright spots in Peggy's caseload.

Three weeks ago, in the session immediately following Lydia's deliverance, Raymond had arrived looking as though he had not slept. He had sat in the chair across from Peggy and had said, without any transitional language, that he had been hearing a voice.

"Not internally," he said carefully, with the precision of a man who had been a teacher too long to be imprecise. "Not the way you hear your own thoughts. Externally. At night, primarily. It began eight days ago."

"What does it say?" Peggy asked. She kept her voice level. She kept her face still. Inside she felt the cold recognition moving through her like a tide.

Raymond's jaw tightened. "It tells me my wife is trying to reach me. That there is a way to speak to her. That I have been—" He stopped. "That I have been denying her by not listening."

The precision of the targeting was breathtaking in its cruelty. Eight months of grief counseling, eight months of careful, patient progress toward acceptance and the integration of loss, and now—in the week following the center's first major spiritual engagement—a voice offering Raymond Okafor the one thing that his grief had made him most vulnerable to: contact with what he had lost.

It was not random. Nothing about this was random.

> **RAYMOND OKAFOR — Age 46 — History Teacher** *Presenting: Auditory phenomena (external voice, nocturnal onset, 8 days duration). Content specifically targeted to grief vulnerability — voice claims to be deceased spouse seeking contact. No prior history of auditory hallucination. No psychotic features. Client is oriented, coherent, and visibly distressed by the phenomena rather than comforted by it — which is clinically significant. He does not believe the voice. He is frightened of what the voice is.*

Peggy spent the session with Raymond doing two things simultaneously: the clinical work of assessing his mental state with the rigor it deserved, and the spiritual work of listening beneath what he said for what was actually present. By the end of the hour she was satisfied on both counts. Raymond was not experiencing a psychotic break. He was not in the grip of complicated grief in a way that was generating hallucination. He was experiencing targeted spiritual intrusion, and he was frightened of it, and his fear was theologically appropriate because the thing he was frightened of was real.

She did not tell him all of this. Not yet. She asked him about his faith, which he described as "currently embattled." She asked whether he had been praying. He said he had been trying but that the voice seemed louder when he prayed, which she recognized immediately as the intensification pattern she had seen in Lydia.

"That is not evidence that your prayer is failing," she told him. "That is evidence that it is working. Pray more. Pray aloud. And bring your church into this—do you have a pastor you trust?"

He named a man Peggy knew: Pastor Anthony Webb at New Covenant Baptist, a serious and grounded shepherd who had been in ministry in Clarksburg for twenty years. She called Webb that evening.

## III.

The second anomaly surfaced on Wednesday, in a session with a client she had been seeing for only six weeks.

Her name was Carla Simmons, thirty-two, a former schoolteacher who had left the profession following what she described as a breakdown in the classroom—a sudden, uncontrolled episode during a parent-teacher conference that she had no memory of afterward.

She had been referred by her primary care physician, who had ruled out seizure disorder and found no neurological explanation for the episode. Carla was soft-spoken and genuinely sweet and carried the slightly hollowed quality of someone who had been afraid of themselves for six weeks and was not yet sure the fear was unfounded.

The Wednesday session had been going normally—carefully, gently, the patient archaeology of a recent history—when Carla paused mid-sentence and looked at Peggy with an expression that was not Carla's expression.

It lasted less than three seconds. Then Carla blinked and resumed her sentence as though there had been no interruption.

Peggy wrote nothing on her notepad. She breathed. She completed the session. Afterward she sat at her desk for a long time, turning what she had seen in her mind, examining it from every angle.

Then she added Carla's name to the list she had not yet named but had already begun keeping.

> **CARLA SIMMONS — Age 32 — Former Teacher** *Presenting: Unexplained dissociative episode in professional setting (6 weeks prior). No neurological cause identified by physicians. During session: brief but unmistakable shift in facial expression and ocular quality (duration approx. 3 seconds), inconsistent with any dissociative or conversion presentation in client's history. Client appeared unaware of the interval. No other anomalies this session. History pending deeper exploration. Note: client mentions maternal grandmother practiced 'spiritual healing' in Haiti. Has not elaborated. Return to this.*

## IV.

By the end of the following week, the list had four names on it.

The third was a teenager—seventeen-year-old Marcus Tilley, referred by his school counselor for anger management and brought to the center by his grandmother, a woman named Dottie Tilley who was one of the prayer warriors at Bethel Chapel and who had, in Peggy's view, more genuine spiritual authority in her left hand than most clergy possessed in their entire careers. Dottie had sat in the waiting room during Marcus's intake session and had said nothing to Peggy directly, but when Peggy had passed her on the way back from the water

cooler, the older woman had looked at her with eyes that carried a specific and knowing weight and had said, quietly: “Something is riding that boy. I’ve been praying against it for two months. I’m glad he’s here.”

The fourth name on the list was the one that troubled Peggy most.

It was someone she had not expected. Someone who had been in her caseload for eleven months with no indication of spiritual complication—a woman whose presenting issues were entirely relational, whose progress had been consistent and measurable, whose faith was mature and her prayer life active. There was no obvious entry point in her history, no ancestral door, no period of occult involvement.

Her name was Sandra Beaumont, fifty-eight, a retired librarian who had come to Peggy for help navigating a difficult estrangement from her adult daughter. She was one of the most straightforwardly stable clients Peggy had ever worked with. She had been, for eleven months, the clinical equivalent of solid ground.

She arrived for her Thursday session in the third week of October looking like someone who had been through a weather system. She sat down and looked at Peggy and said, with the bluntness of a woman who has always preferred direct speech and whose directness had only intensified under pressure:

“Something came into my bedroom last Tuesday night. I don’t mean a person. I mean a something. It stood at the foot of my bed and it told me things about myself that I have never told another living soul, and it told me that if I continued to come here—to this center, to you—it would tell those things to my daughter.”

The room was absolutely still.

“It named specific things,” Sandra continued. Her voice was steady with the steadiness of someone who has decided, in the privacy of their own character, that they will not be undone by this. “Private sins. Old ones. Things I confessed to God thirty years ago and believed were under the blood. And it knew them. Every one of them. With details that no living person could know.”

> *“For the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down.” — Revelation 12:10 (NKJV)*

Peggy understood immediately what she was hearing. The accuser. The ancient function that Scripture named with precision: not the tempter, not the destroyer, but the one that stands before God and before the human heart with a detailed inventory of every failure, every wound, every hidden shame, deploying them not as truth but as weapon. The goal was not exposure. The goal was silence. Stop coming here. Stop the work. And it had chosen Sandra—stable, faithful, safe Sandra—because Sandra was the least expected target, which made her the most vulnerable one.

It was targeting the perimeter.

It was looking for the point at which Peggy's world of care and counsel intersected with ordinary, unguarded lives, and it was pressing there. Not on the obvious cases. Not on Lydia or Nora, who were already in the fight and armored for it. On the people around them. The congregation. The community.

"Sandra," Peggy said, "I need you to hear something very important. What came to your bedroom on Tuesday night was not bringing you truth. It was deploying facts in the service of a lie. There is a profound difference. The things it named—the sins you confessed thirty years ago—they are under the blood. Not metaphorically. Legally, in every realm that matters, they do not belong to you anymore. They were surrendered. They were covered. What spoke to you on Tuesday has no jurisdiction over what has been forgiven."

Sandra looked at her for a long moment. "Then why does it know them?"

"Because knowing them and owning them are different things," Peggy said. "And because it is an accuser by nature. This is what it does. It is not showing you a truth—it is showing you a record that has already been expunged and calling it current. That is the lie."

> *"There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus." — Romans 8:1 (NKJV)*

## V.

That evening, Peggy called an emergency meeting.

She used that word deliberately when she texted Gerald and Eze and Tamika: emergency. Not crisis. Not urgent. Emergency, because she needed everyone to understand that the

situation had changed in kind and not merely in degree, and she needed them to understand it quickly.

They met at Calvary Bible Church at seven o'clock, in Gerald's study, which was large enough to hold them and had been prayed over enough times to feel, when they gathered in it, like standing inside a fortress. Marjorie Tate came also, because Peggy had called her and Marjorie had said simply: "I'll be there."

Peggy laid the list on Gerald's desk.

Four names. Four clients. Four different presentations, four different histories, four different points of entry. But the timing was identical: all four anomalies had surfaced in the two weeks following Lydia's deliverance. And the strategic logic, once she articulated it, was unmistakable.

"It's a counterattack," Gerald said. Not a question.

"And a message," Eze said. He had driven up from Charlottesville in under two hours, which meant he had left within twenty minutes of receiving her text. He sat in the chair across from Gerald's desk with his hands folded and his eyes moving across the list with the trained attention of a man reading a battlefield map. "It is saying: for every one you free, we will press ten others. It is attempting to overwhelm your capacity."

"Can it do that?" Tamika asked. It was a precise and important question, asked without fear and without bravado.

Eze looked at her. "It can attempt it. Whether it succeeds depends on two things: the prayer cover we maintain over this center and everyone connected to it, and the speed with which we identify and support those who are under pressure before the pressure becomes occupation."

"Triage," Marjorie said, from the corner where she sat with her tea. "You're describing spiritual triage."

"Yes," Eze said. "Exactly that." He looked at Peggy. "You cannot do this alone. You have been approaching this as a counselor with a specialist called in for specific engagements. That model was appropriate for the beginning. It is not appropriate for what this has become. What this has become requires a team that is operational at all times, not assembled for individual sessions."

"Are you saying we need a permanent structure?" Peggy asked.

"I am saying you need a prayer covering that does not sleep. I am saying you need agreement between the pastoral leadership of this community that what is happening here is real and requires a coordinated response. And I am saying—" He paused, and in the pause she heard something she had not heard from him before: not urgency, exactly, but a heightening of the weight he carried into every room. "I am saying that this is not, any longer, about two women who came to a counseling center in Clarksburg, Virginia. This is a territorial engagement. The Enemy has established a presence in this community—probably for much longer than we know—and what happened in that session room with Lydia was the first significant challenge to that presence. What we are seeing now is the organized response."

> *"And in those days the angels shall descend into the hidden places and gather together in one place all who have aided unrighteousness. But the Holy One shall arise in those days with great vengeance to execute judgment." — 1 Enoch 91:15 (R.H. Charles translation)*

## VI.

The meeting lasted three hours.

By the end of it they had built, on four sheets of Gerald's legal pad in Peggy's handwriting, a structure that Gerald called a war room and Eze called a prayer canopy and Tamika called, with the directness that was her greatest gift, "finally doing this properly."

The structure had four components.

The first was a continuous prayer covering over New Hope Counseling Center, maintained by a rotating team of intercessors from Calvary Bible and Bethel Chapel and Grace Fellowship—three churches, eighteen people initially, with Gerald coordinating. Not prayer meetings. Continuous, assigned, specific intercession: the building, the staff, the clients, and the broader spiritual territory of Clarksburg. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, divided into two-hour prayer watches. Dottie Tilley, whom Peggy called from Gerald's study that evening, agreed to coordinate the Bethel Chapel contingent without hesitation and with the contained satisfaction of a woman who has been waiting to be asked.

The second component was a weekly gathering of the core team—Peggy, Eze, Gerald, Tamika, Marjorie, and whichever pastoral representatives were needed—to review the caseload,

identify new anomalies, and coordinate response. Clinical confidentiality would be maintained rigorously: names were not shared with the intercessors, only spiritual conditions. The boundary between clinical and spiritual was real and would be honored. But the two could no longer operate in separate silos.

The third component was a protocol for client assessment. Peggy would add to her standard intake process a gentle but direct set of questions about spiritual history—family practices, personal involvement in non-Christian spirituality, any history of the kinds of experiences that the clinical literature categorized as unusual and that she was now categorizing with a more precise vocabulary. Not every client would have a spiritual dimension to their presenting issue. But she could no longer afford to miss the ones who did.

The fourth component was the most significant, and it came from Eze, and it was the thing that changed the room when he said it.

"You need to go to the pastors of this community," he said. "Not Gerald, not Anthony Webb, not the ones who already know. The ones who do not know. The senior pastor of every church in Clarksburg needs to be in a room together and told, plainly and without apology, that there is an organized spiritual assault on their congregations. Some of them will resist this. Some of them will dismiss it as sensationalism or charismatic excess. You must say it anyway. Because the people in their pews are being pressed, and their shepherds need to know."

The room was quiet.

"That is a significant ask," Gerald said. Not objecting. Acknowledging the weight of it.

"Yes," Eze said. "It is. But consider the alternative. Consider what happens to Raymond Okafor if his pastor does not know that the voice he is hearing is real and is not his wife and can be addressed. Consider what happens to Sandra Beaumont if the accuser is not named for what it is and her shame continues to be weaponized against her. Consider what happens to that boy—Marcus—if no one in his life has the language to tell him that what is riding him can be removed."

Another silence.

"I'll call the meeting," Gerald said. "I'll get them in a room. The authority to do that is mine and I'll use it."

> *"And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and*

> *whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” — Matthew 16:19 (NKJV)*

## VII.

Nora Ellison came to the center on Friday morning with something new in her face.

Peggy noticed it before Nora sat down: a quality of alertness that had not been there before, something behind the eyes that was brighter and more deliberate than the exhausted, half-present look that had characterized her early sessions. She had been meeting with Peggy twice weekly since her first walk-in appearance, and the sessions had been, by clinical measure, making consistent progress. By spiritual measure they had been making something more significant: Nora was finding her way toward God.

Not dramatically. Not with the sudden conversion narrative of a revival testimony. With the slow, questioning, frequently interrupted approach of a young woman who had been burned by spirituality and was approaching the real thing the way you approach a fire when you have been burned before—carefully, with your hands out, testing the heat, finding, with increasing wonder, that this fire was different.

She sat down and looked at Peggy and said: “Something happened this week.”

“Tell me.”

“I was in my room at Carol’s—Tuesday night, around midnight—and I could feel it pressing. The way it does when it’s agitated, when something has disturbed it. I’ve been keeping the journal like you asked, and I’ve been writing down when it’s active and when it’s quiet, and Tuesday night was the most active it’s been since I came here.” She paused. “And I did something I haven’t done before. Not the way I’ve done it before.”

“What did you do?”

“I prayed. Not the way I was taught as a kid, where you say the words in the right order and hope something hears you. I—I talked to Him. I said: I don’t know if You’re real or if You’re what I think You are but if You are what Peggy says You are and what the Bible says You are, then I need You and I am asking You to help me.” She looked at Peggy steadily. “And He answered.”

Peggy waited.

"Not in a voice. Not externally. But something changed in the room. The pressure—the pressing—it… it flinched. It pulled back. Like something had come in that it didn't want to be near. And in the space where it pulled back, I felt—" She searched for the word with the intensity of someone who understands that getting it right matters. "I felt located. Like I knew where I was and who I was and that somebody knew where I was too. That I wasn't—that I wasn't lost."

> *"And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart." — Jeremiah 29:13 (NKJV)*

Peggy sat with what Nora had said for a moment.

Then she said: "Nora, what you experienced on Tuesday night is the most important thing that has happened since you came through that door. Not the most dramatic. The most important. You reached toward God in honest, unadorned need, and He came. He always comes when that prayer is prayed. Without exception, without condition, without requiring you to have the right vocabulary or the right history or the right amount of faith. You had enough faith to ask. That is all He requires."

Nora looked down at her hands. They were still in her lap in a way they had not been in early sessions—not gripped or guarded, but simply resting. "I think I want to be baptized," she said quietly. As though trying the sentence out. As though checking whether it sounded like her. It did. "I think I want to make it—official. Is that the right word?"

"Public," Peggy said gently. "The word is public. Yes. And yes, Nora. I think you do."

## VIII.

On the last Friday of October, Gerald Hooper convened a meeting of eleven pastors in the fellowship hall of Calvary Bible Church.

He had called each one personally over the course of the week, saying only that there was a matter of significant community concern that required their collective attention and their willingness to set aside an evening. Nine had come immediately. Two had come reluctantly, which was better than not coming.

Peggy sat at the table with Gerald and Eze and presented what she had witnessed over the past six weeks: Lydia, Nora, the deliverance session, the four names on the list, the pattern

of coordinated pressure across the community. She presented it with the same precision she brought to every clinical presentation, and with the same honesty she brought to every prayer, and with the full awareness that some of the men and women around the table would receive it easily and some would struggle and some might reject it entirely.

She was right on all three counts.

Pastor Anthony Webb of New Covenant Baptist leaned forward with his elbows on the table and said: "I've had three people in my congregation tell me about unusual experiences in the past two weeks. I've been treating them individually. You're telling me they're connected."

"I'm telling you they may be," Peggy said carefully. "The pattern is consistent with a coordinated response to a spiritual engagement in this community. I cannot prove that forensically. But I can tell you what I have seen, and I can tell you that the people in your congregation who are having these experiences need their pastor to know that what they're experiencing is real and has a name and can be addressed."

A pastor from a mainline denomination—politely skeptical, professionally careful—asked whether Peggy was suggesting that the appropriate response to mental health presentations was spiritual intervention rather than clinical treatment.

"No," she said. "I am a licensed clinical counselor with twenty-two years of practice, and I take the full range of psychological explanation seriously. I do not attribute to the spiritual what is better explained by the psychological. But I have spent six weeks in the company of presentations that the psychological framework cannot adequately explain, and I am suggesting that the spiritual and the clinical are not mutually exclusive domains and that the people in this room—pastors and counselor together—are better equipped to care for this community when we are operating in concert rather than in parallel."

The mainline pastor said nothing further, but he did not leave.

Pastor Elias of Bethel Chapel—who had referred Lydia Crane to Peggy eight weeks ago, which felt now like the opening of a door she had not understood herself to be walking through—looked around the table and said: "I think most of us have known something was wrong in this community for longer than six weeks. I think most of us have been treating the symptoms without naming the disease. I think this woman is naming it."

A long silence.

Then, one by one, around the table, the pastors began to speak. Not all in agreement. Not all in the same theological language. But speaking—honestly, pastorally, out of the accumulated

weight of things they had seen in their congregations that they had not had language for or community for or the courage to say out loud.

Peggy listened.

And in the listening she understood something that she had not fully understood before: she had not been assembled by God as a solitary warrior. She had been assembled as a catalyst. The battle was not hers to fight alone. It was the Church's battle—the whole Church, in this town, gathered around this table, beginning, cautiously and seriously and with the full weight of their office and their faith, to understand what they were dealing with.

> *"And the Lord said to Michael: 'Go, bind Semyaza and his associates, who have united themselves with women so as to have defiled themselves with them in all their uncleanness. Bind them fast for seventy generations in the valleys of the earth, till the day of their judgment and of their consummation.'" — 1 Enoch 10:11–12 (R.H. Charles translation)*

After the meeting, as people were gathering coats and exchanging numbers and making the small practical arrangements that follow significant conversations, Pastor Elias found Peggy in the hallway and stopped her with a hand briefly on her arm.

"When I referred Lydia to you," he said, "I didn't know what you could do for her. I knew what I couldn't do alone." He paused. "I think God had already arranged the rest."

Peggy looked at him. "I think you're right," she said.

She drove home through the October dark with the heater on and her mind moving across the landscape of the evening—the eleven pastors, the three churches, the prayer canopy, the list of four names, Nora's quiet declaration about baptism, the word coordination underlined twice in her journal.

She thought about the Enemy's strategy and she thought about God's. She thought about what it meant that a battle which had begun with one barefoot girl on a porch in September had become, by the last Friday of October, the organized concern of the pastoral community of an entire town.

She thought: this is how the Kingdom works. Not in the single dramatic gesture but in the slow, patient, accumulated turning of ordinary people toward the light. Not the general's

charge but the army's advance. Not the lone counselor praying at her desk at midnight but eleven pastors around a table beginning to speak the same language.

She thought: He is building something here.

She thought: I am grateful to be a brick.

❖ ❖ ❖

*End of Chapter Seven*

## CHAPTER EIGHT
# *The Night of Deliverance*

> *"Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." — Psalm 23:4 (NKJV)*

> *"And in that place I saw a terrible thing: a great fire burning and flaming, and the place was cleft to the abyss, being full of great descending columns of fire. Neither its extent nor its magnitude could I see, nor could I conjecture." — 1 Enoch 21:7–8 (R.H. Charles translation)*

### I.

The meeting was set for a Saturday.

Not the counseling center this time. Gerald had offered Calvary Bible Church's lower hall—a wide, plain room with folding tables and institutional carpet and a small kitchen off one side that smelled perpetually of coffee and communion bread. Unglamorous by design. The kind of space where the work of the Church happens without fanfare, where casseroles are assembled

for bereaved families and AA meetings run on Tuesday evenings and children learn to fold bulletins for Sunday service. A working room. A room with no pretension about what it was for.

Eze had approved the choice when Peggy described it. “Good,” he had said. “We do not need an impressive room. We need a prayed-over room.” The intercessors had been in the hall for three hours before anyone else arrived—six of Dottie Tilley’s people from Bethel Chapel, moving through the space with anointing oil and spoken Scripture, laying hands on doorframes and corners and the chairs that would be occupied, establishing the ground the way a surveyor establishes property lines: precisely, with full intention, and with the understanding that what is marked matters.

Nora Ellison had asked, two weeks earlier, whether she could be present.

Peggy had thought carefully before answering. Nora was not yet baptized—that was planned for the following Sunday at Calvary Bible, with Gerald officiating and Carol Briggs standing beside her as her sponsor. She was not yet two months removed from her first session. She was, by every measure, still in the early stages of the very process that the night’s work would advance. But she had asked with the focused, unfrightened clarity of a young woman who has decided something, and what she had decided was that she was done being a passive recipient of what was happening to her. She wanted to witness the work. She wanted to be in the room when the doors were closed.

Peggy had said yes. She had also assigned Carol Briggs to sit beside her throughout, and she had spent forty-five minutes with Nora on Friday afternoon preparing her for what she might see and hear, and she had looked into Nora’s eyes at the end of that conversation and found there something she trusted: a faith that was young and real and properly frightened and properly anchored.

The two people whose freedom would be the work of the evening were brought separately.

Lydia Crane arrived with David at seven o’clock, driving herself in from the west side of town through a November evening that had turned cold and dark with the decisive finality of a season making its intentions plain. She wore the gray slacks and blue blouse she had worn to her first session—Peggy noticed this and understood it as intentional. A returning to the beginning. A statement of continuity with the woman who had come here frightened and lost, and the statement that she was the same woman, and that she intended to leave here different.

Marcus Tilley arrived with his grandmother Dottie at seven-fifteen. He was a tall boy, broad in the shoulder in the unfinished way of someone whose body has grown faster than his sense of it, and he had the specific look that Peggy had come to recognize: the guardedness of a

young person who has been told all his life that what he was experiencing was not real, was anger, was attitude, was a phase. He looked at the room and the people in it with the wariness of someone who has been burned by having needs and has not yet learned whether this was safe.

Dottie put her hand on his arm and said something in his ear that Peggy could not hear. Whatever it was, his shoulders dropped by a fraction. He sat down.

> *"The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound." — Isaiah 61:1 (NKJV)*

## II.

### 7:30 P.M.

Eze opened in prayer.

It was not a long prayer. Eze's prayers were never long—they were dense, the way a good stock is dense: reduced to their essential substance, concentrated, nourishing. He prayed the covering of the blood of Christ over every person in the room and over the room itself. He prayed the authority of Christ over every principality and power that had claimed jurisdiction in these two lives and over this community. He prayed the presence of the Holy Spirit as the active agent of the evening—not the team, not the methods, not the years of experience in the room—the Spirit. He ended with three words that he spoke with the weight of a man who has said them in rooms like this for twenty years and has never once said them as a formality:

***"Lord, have Your way."***

The room held those words for a moment.

Then Eze looked at the two people who had come to be set free, and he spoke to them directly in a way that Peggy had not seen him do before—not the instructional tone of the preparation conversations, not the assessing quality of their first meeting, but something more personal and more direct. He sat in a chair across from them rather than standing, which reduced the distance and the formality simultaneously.

“Lydia. Marcus.” He said their names the way you say the names of people who matter. “You are here because you chose to be here. Nobody brought you against your will. Nobody is going to do anything to you tonight that you haven’t consented to. Do you understand that?”

Yes, from both of them.

“Good. Now hear this, and hear it clearly:” He leaned forward slightly. “Whatever you have carried—however long you have carried it—it does not have the final word over your life. Jesus Christ has the final word over your life. And tonight, in His name and by His authority, we are going to speak that word together. You are going to participate. Your voice matters in this room. When I ask you to speak, speak. When I ask you to renounce something, renounce it out loud. The spoken declaration of a free person is a weapon in the hand of God. Use it.”

Marcus Tilley was looking at Eze with the expression of someone who has been waiting, without knowing they were waiting, to be spoken to exactly this way. His jaw was still set but his eyes had changed. Something in them had opened.

## III.

### 7:55 P.M.

They began with Lydia.

The protocol that Eze and Peggy had developed over the preceding weeks was methodical, specific, and unhurried. It began not with confrontation but with identity: a deliberate, extended affirmation of who Lydia was in Christ, drawn from Scripture, spoken over her by Eze and echoed by Peggy and confirmed aloud by Lydia herself. Each declaration was a stone laid in the foundation before the structure was tested.

> *“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” — Galatians 2:20 (NKJV)*

Lydia repeated the verse aloud. Her voice was steady. David, seated beside her, held her hand and prayed under his breath with the consistent, quiet intensity of a man doing the most important thing he had ever done.

Then the renunciations began.

Eze read from the list that Peggy had compiled across their weeks of work—the map of entry points, the specific named events, the ancestral history laid out in sequence from Esther Crane in West Virginia to the Ouija board at fourteen to the six years of active practice to the objects handled at the aunt's estate. Each one named. Each one addressed. Each one formally, verbally, in the name of Christ, renounced.

For the first twelve minutes, the room was quiet except for the voices: Eze reading, Lydia repeating, Tamika praying continuously in a low undertone that Peggy felt more than heard, a current running beneath everything else.

At thirteen minutes, the atmosphere changed.

It was the same quality of change she had experienced in the session on October the fourteenth: the drop in temperature, the shift in pressure, the sub-audible vibration that was felt in the chest before it was perceived by any other sense. But tonight it was not the contained, probing pressure of a single entity testing a single counselor in a small office. It was larger. Denser. As though what had been compressed into the sessions was now expanding into its full dimensions, the way a compressed thing expands when the container is removed.

Peggy planted her feet. She breathed. She reached for the verse she had been carrying in her chest pocket—literally, written on an index card in her own hand, because she had known she might need it in a physical way:

> *"You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." — 1 John 4:4 (NKJV)*

She read it aloud. Not loudly. Clearly. As a statement of fact into a room that was attempting to suggest something different.

## IV.

### 8:22 P.M.

The entity spoke through Lydia for the first time at twenty-two minutes past eight.

It did not announce itself gradually, the way it had in the October session. It arrived full—voice, posture, temperature, the whole landscape of its presence—in the space between one of

Lydia's renunciations and the next, occupying the pause the way darkness occupies the moment between a light being extinguished and the eyes adjusting.

Lydia's body went rigid. Her hands—which had been in David's—wrenched free with a force that was not Lydia's force. David made a sound—not a cry, a sharp intake of breath—and reached for her again and she turned to him with a face that was not her face and he held her gaze for a moment with the eyes of a man who loves his wife deeply enough to not look away from what is wearing her face, and then he bowed his head and prayed with the ferocity of someone who has nothing left to do but the most powerful thing.

Eze did not pause.

"You are addressed," he said, in the tone of someone speaking to something that is required to listen. Not loud. Not theatrical. The authority of a man who has stood in this space before and knows exactly where he stands. "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, who died and rose and sits at the right hand of the Father, I address every spirit that has claimed access to this woman. You will not harm her. You will not harm anyone in this room. You will answer truthfully when I speak to you, and you will leave when you are commanded to leave. These are not negotiations. This is the exercise of authority delegated to the servants of Jesus Christ by Jesus Christ Himself. You know this authority. You recognize it. And you will submit to it."

The room held a silence that was not empty.

***"We were here before you were born," the voice said.***

It used Lydia's vocal apparatus but not Lydia's voice—deeper, flatter, carrying in it the quality that Peggy had come to recognize as the specific, cold intelligence of something very old that has no warmth in it and has never had warmth in it and has spent its existence in opposition to warmth.

"Yes," Eze said, without inflection. "You were. And Christ was before all things, and by Him all things consist, and He was before you, and your authority does not exceed His in any realm or dimension. Name yourself."

> *"He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence." — Colossians 1:17–18 (NKJV)*

A silence. In the silence, Tamika's prayer did not stop. Dottie's hand was on Marcus's shoulder and Dottie was praying in a low, steady voice that was not performance but weapon. Nora sat very still beside Carol Briggs with her hands open in her lap and her lips moving in the prayer she had learned eleven days ago in a spare bedroom at midnight—the honest, unadorned one that had worked the first time.

Then the name.

Not Legion this time—Legion had been what they had encountered in October, in the full manifestation. What named itself now was a constituent voice, one of the many. Its name was Inheritance—a name that landed in the room with the specific and terrible logic of something that has defined itself by what it has stolen across generations, that has built its identity on the claim of ownership over a bloodline it had no right to inhabit.

Eze nodded once, with the specific composure of a man who is not surprised by the name but is filing it precisely.

"Inheritance," he said. "You came through the grandmother. Esther Crane, West Virginia, nineteen fifty-four. Invited through the practice of divination. That invitation has been formally renounced by Lydia Crane, the last living member of the line into which you were invited, under the authority of Jesus Christ. Your claim is void. The legal ground on which you stand has been canceled by the blood of the covenant. I command you, in the name of Jesus Christ, to leave this woman, to leave this family, to go where the Lord Jesus Christ sends you, and to never return."

## V.

### 8:51 P.M.

What followed was not quiet.

Peggy had read the accounts. She had read them in Mark and Luke, she had read them in the Desert Fathers, she had read them in Eze's worn notebook and in the case histories of the deliverance ministers whose work she had studied over the preceding weeks. She had understood, intellectually, that the departure of a long-established presence was not a peaceful event. The body that had been inhabited resisted and convulsed. The entity that had claimed territory for decades did not yield it with dignity.

Reading and being present were not the same thing.

Lydia's body arched. Not violently—not in the way of a grand mal seizure, which Marjorie had already distinguished from the doorway with the trained eye of someone who knows the difference—but with the deep, full-body tension of someone fighting a current from the inside. She made a sound that was not a scream and was not a word and was not anything Peggy had a clinical category for. David's hands found her shoulders and he held them and he said her name, quietly, repeatedly, like a lighthouse sending its signal into a storm: I am here, I am here, I am here.

Eze commanded again. The same words. The same tone. Not louder—authority does not require volume—but with a specificity that increased with each repetition, naming the grounds of dismissal more precisely with each command, closing each door by name as the entity contested it.

Tamika was standing now. She had been seated when the session began and she had risen at some point without anyone directing her to, and she was praying with her hands raised and her face lifted and her whole body oriented toward the same purpose as her words, which were specific and authoritative and continuous and not in any way distressed. Peggy had told her: fear is reasonable. But Tamika was not afraid. She was occupied—fully, without remainder—by the prayer.

Then Dottie Tilley stood.

She was sixty-seven years old and no more than five feet three inches tall and she stood in that room with the bearing of someone who has been doing this work longer than most people in the room had been alive, and she spoke four words in a voice that did not need to be loud because it needed only to be true:

***"Loose her and go."***

The words were from John chapter eleven—Lazarus, bound in grave clothes, called out of the tomb, and then the command to his community: loose him. Let him go. The application was not identical to the original context, but the principle was the same and the authority behind it was the same and the room recognized both.

> *"And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Loose him, and let him go.'" — John 11:44 (NKJV)*

Lydia Crane released a breath.

It was not a dramatic sound. It was the sound of a body completing something it had been working toward for eight months—a long, shuddering exhalation, like a house settling after a storm. Her shoulders dropped. Her hands opened. Her head came forward and she sat for a moment with her face in her open hands, and the room was completely still around her, and then she looked up.

Her eyes.

Peggy had been watching eyes in this work for weeks now, had become a scholar of the specific quality of gaze that distinguished Lydia from what wore Lydia's face. What she saw now was Lydia—fully, completely, with a clarity and presence and depth that she had glimpsed only in fragments across months of sessions. It was the most ordinary extraordinary thing she had ever seen: a woman, returned to herself.

David Crane put his arms around his wife.

He held her the way you hold something that has been lost and recovered—with the specific tenderness of someone who knows the weight of the alternative.

And Lydia Crane, for the first time in eight months, wept without a voice inside her weeping. She wept clean.

## VI.

### 9:18 P.M.

They gave Lydia twenty minutes.

Marjorie came in from the doorway and checked her pulse and her blood pressure and asked her a series of quiet clinical questions with the matter-of-fact competence of someone who has seen the extraordinary before and understands that the extraordinary still has a body that needs attending. Lydia's vitals were elevated but stable. She was coherent, oriented, and—this was the word Marjorie used in her notes afterward, with the specific clinical precision that Peggy recognized as Marjorie's version of wonder—unburdened. As though something that had been pressing on her physiologically had been removed, and the body was recalibrating to the unfamiliar lightness of its own unoccupied weight.

Someone made tea. It was Nora.

She had been sitting very still through the whole of Lydia's session—Peggy had checked on her twice with a look, and twice Nora had met her eyes with a gaze that was shaken and present and entirely not going anywhere. Now she got up quietly and went to the small kitchen off the hall and came back with two cups of tea, one of which she set in front of Lydia with a look that communicated something between the two of them that required no words: I know what you just came through. I know it from the inside. Well done.

Lydia looked at her and nodded. The nod was also a complete sentence.

Eze used the twenty minutes to sit with Marcus Tilley.

Not to prepare him for what was coming in the formal sense—that preparation had happened across the preceding days, in sessions with Peggy and a conversation with Eze by phone. But to sit with him as a man sits with a young man who is about to face something significant and who needs, more than instruction, to know that the person who will stand with him in the room has stood in this room before and come out the other side.

"I've done this a lot of times," Eze said to Marcus quietly. "I know what it looks like from the outside. I've also talked to people who have been through what you're about to go through, from the inside. And the thing they all say—without exception—is that the worst moment of the night is before it starts. Once it starts, once the authority is in the room and the command is spoken, what has been pressing becomes less. Not immediately free, perhaps. But less."

Marcus was quiet for a moment. Then: "My grandma says this is what God made me for. That I was born with something on me and God knew about it before I was born and He let me get to today to have it removed."

Eze looked at him steadily. "Your grandmother is a very wise woman."

Marcus nodded. "She's been telling me that my whole life." A pause. The ghost of a smile—the first Peggy had seen from him. "I'm starting to believe her."

> *"For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope."*
> *— Jeremiah 29:11 (NKJV)*

## VII.

### 9:42 P.M.

Marcus Tilley's session was different from Lydia's in the way that every engagement in this work was different—shaped by the specific history of the person, the specific nature of what had entered, and the specific character of the person who was fighting for their own freedom.

With Lydia it had been the weight of generations—a long, accumulated claim, patient and dense and old. With Marcus it was something that felt younger, more aggressive, less settled. It had come in through a door that was more recent and had not yet established the deep roots that Inheritance had taken seven decades to grow. This was, in the terrible arithmetic of such things, slightly in their favor.

The entry point in Marcus's history was not ancestral in the same direct sense. His mother—absent since he was six, by Dottie's account—had been involved in practices that Dottie described, with the economical precision of someone who has had two months to pray and think about it, as "the kind of thing that opens doors for children who have no say in the matter." There was a name his mother had given him—not his legal name, but a name used in certain rituals—and that name had functioned as a point of dedication, a formal marking that had created access.

Eze addressed this first. Before the renunciations, before the commands, he addressed the naming directly.

"Marcus," he said, "I am going to speak over you a truth that supersedes every name that has been used over you without your knowledge or consent. Are you ready?"

Marcus said yes.

"Your name is Marcus. You are the son of the living God. You were knit together in your mother's womb by the hand of a Father who knew you before you were born and has not for one moment lost sight of you—not in any year of your life, not in any room you have been in, not in any moment when you were afraid and alone and convinced that whatever was pressing on you was stronger than you were. He has not lost sight of you. And whatever name was placed on you without your consent is revoked tonight, in the name of Jesus Christ, and the name that replaces it is the one that was always yours: beloved."

> *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you." — Jeremiah 1:5 (NKJV)*

Marcus Tilley sat very still. His jaw was set and his eyes were bright with something that was not going to become tears in public and also might. Dottie, beside him, pressed her hand briefly on his arm and said nothing, which was the right thing.

The renunciations proceeded. Marcus was an active participant in a way that Lydia, overwhelmed by the history and the manifestation, had been unable to be throughout. He spoke each renunciation clearly, with a firmness that increased as the session continued—as though each declaration gave him more ground to stand on, and on the ground he was building he was becoming, with visible and remarkable speed, someone different. Taller. More present. As though the compression that had been riding his shoulders was being redistributed, ounce by ounce, into the air of the room.

When the entity manifested—and it did, briefly and with the specific aggression of something that has not been fully rooted and is therefore more reactive, less controlled, than Inheritance had been—Eze met it with the same composure, the same authority, the same unhurried specificity of command.

It named itself: Desolation.

Peggy felt the name land in the room. She had heard it before—in Nora's session, in the very beginning of this. The same name. The same entity, or one operating under the same designation, pressing into a different life through a different door. The coordination was not metaphorical. It was operational.

"Desolation," Eze said, without pausing. "I know this name. It has been spoken in this work before. And I command you, by the authority of Jesus Christ, to release this young man—this son of God, this beloved of the Father—and to go where the Lord sends you, and to never return to this life or this family. You have no legal ground here. The name that was used to invite you has been revoked. The access you were given was given by someone who had no authority over this child's soul. You are trespassing. Leave."

> *"For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds." — 2 Corinthians 10:4 (NKJV)*

Marcus Tilley went through his own version of what Lydia had gone through—less prolonged, more acute, like a storm that is brief and full. He gripped the armrests of the chair and his eyes closed and his breath came in hard, controlled pulls, and Dottie stood beside him with her hand on his shoulder praying in the language of someone who has been praying for

this boy since before he knew she was, and Tamika held the intercession steady, and Nora sat with her lips moving and her hands open, and Marjorie watched from the doorway with clinical attention and the prayer of someone who has learned that medicine and faith occupy the same world.

And then Marcus Tilley opened his eyes.

He sat in the chair that he had arrived in and he was seventeen years old and he was free.

He looked at his grandmother. Dottie looked at him. Between them passed something that required no words and received none—the wordless communication of two people who have prayed for the same thing for a long time and are now, at last, on the other side of it.

Then Marcus said, quietly, into the stillness of the room:

***"Is it always going to feel like this?"***

Eze looked at him. "Like what?"

"Like I can breathe," Marcus said.

The room was quiet for a long moment.

"Yes," Eze said. "It is."

## VIII.

### 11:47 P.M.

The room emptied slowly, the way rooms empty after significant events—not with the efficiency of departure but with the particular reluctance of people who are not yet ready to leave the place where the important thing happened. Conversations in small clusters. Hands held. Prayers offered quietly between individuals who have been through something together and need, before they separate, to acknowledge that they have been through it together.

David Crane shook Eze's hand for a long time and was unable to speak. Eze received this without discomfort. He had been shaken hands in silence by people in this condition before and he understood that silence was not inadequate—it was sometimes the only honest response.

Dottie Tilley embraced Peggy in the hallway. She was a small woman and the embrace was brief and total, the kind that communicates without ambiguity: I have loved my grandson for seventeen years and you were part of the night he got his life back and I will not forget this.

Nora Ellison was the last to leave. She stood in the doorway of the lower hall with her coat on and her hands in her pockets and she looked at Peggy with the particular expression of someone who has watched something that will permanently alter how they understand the world, and who is in the process of integrating the alteration.

"I go in the water on Sunday," she said.

"I know," Peggy said.

"I wasn't sure, until tonight. I mean—I was sure. But I wasn't… I didn't fully understand what I was getting into. What I was coming out of." She paused. "I understand now. Both sides of it. What it looks like when something leaves and what it looks like when Someone comes in instead."

"What does it look like?" Peggy asked.

Nora thought for a moment.

"The leaving looks like a storm," she said. "The coming in looks like breathing."

Peggy stood in the doorway after Nora had gone and held those words in the way you hold a sentence that is true. Then she went back into the hall where Eze and Gerald and Tamika and Marjorie were still gathered, and she stood with them in the wreckage and the glory of what the evening had been, and she felt—beneath the exhaustion, beneath the awe, beneath the weight and the cost of it—the specific, unmistakable quality of a person who has done what they were made to do.

Not the satisfaction of completion. The confirmation of direction. The sense that she was pointed the right way and moving and that the ground beneath her was solid and the One who had called her here had not withdrawn and would not.

> *"And the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To Him be the power for ever and ever. Amen." — 1 Peter 5:10–11 (NIV)*

She wrote one line in her journal that night, before she slept, sitting at her kitchen table with Ezra warm on the chair beside her and the November dark thick and quiet beyond the windows:

> *Tonight two people went from bound to free. There is nothing in twenty-two years of this work that compares to that sentence. Nothing in any credential I hold, any conference I have spoken at, any paper I have written. Two people. Free. In the name of Jesus Christ. That is the whole story. That is the only story that matters. Lord — do it again.*

She closed the journal.

She turned off the light.

Outside, November held Clarksburg in its cold and patient grip, and the streets were quiet, and somewhere across town in their separate houses Lydia Crane and Marcus Tilley slept—not the haunted, contested sleep of the past months but the clean, profound, uninterrupted sleep of people who are, for the first time in a long time, the only inhabitants of their own rest.

And at 3:17 in the morning, nothing came to the foot of Peggy Walters's bed.

Nothing came, and nothing would come, and she slept on in the house that belonged to God, in the life that belonged to God, on the night that had gone exactly as God had intended, and the darkness outside the window was only darkness, and the morning, when it came, would be light.

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*End of Chapter Eight*

## CHAPTER NINE
# *Wounded Warriors*

> *"And He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." — 2 Corinthians 12:9 (NKJV)*

*"And I was afraid, and I fell upon my face, and my whole body became relaxed, and my spirit was transformed." — 1 Enoch 60:3 (R.H. Charles translation)*

## I.

The crash came on Sunday.

She had expected it. Eze had warned her, with the matter-of-fact precision of a man who has seen this pattern enough times to document it: after a significant spiritual engagement, the person who has held the authority in the room will experience, in the days immediately following, a period of depletion that is both physical and spiritual and that resembles, in its symptoms, a combination of extreme physical exhaustion and low-grade grief. Not because anything has gone wrong. Because something has gone right, and right costs.

She had understood this intellectually. She had even thought herself prepared for it.

She was not prepared for it.

She woke on Sunday morning at seven-fifteen—late, by her standards—and lay in bed looking at the ceiling with the specific quality of stillness that is not rest but vacancy. Her body felt as though it had run a distance she had not trained for. Not painful, exactly. Emptied. As though everything she had brought into that lower hall on Saturday night—every prayer, every act of authority, every deployment of faith and training and will—had been drawn out of her and used and had not yet been replaced.

She thought: I should pray.

She could not find the words.

This was the thing that frightened her most, in the days that followed: not the physical exhaustion, which was real and significant, but the silence at the place where her prayer life had always lived. The access point that had functioned reliably for thirty-seven years—the place in her chest where she turned toward God and found the turning easy, natural, the way breathing is natural—was not gone. But it was muffled. As though something had been placed between herself and that access point. Not blocking it. Dampening it.

She lay in bed for forty-five minutes. Then she got up and made coffee and sat at the kitchen table with her Bible open and Ezra on the chair beside her and she read, without comprehension, for twenty minutes. The words were familiar. They did not land.

> *Sunday, November 3rd. I cannot feel God this morning. I know that feeling is not the same as presence — I have taught this to a hundred clients, that faith is not a feeling and the absence of feeling is not the absence of God. I know this theologically. I am discovering what it costs to know it personally. He is here. I am choosing to believe He is here. But the choosing feels like pushing through something thick, and I am very tired, and for the first time in many weeks I am aware that I am a fifty-four-year-old woman who spent last night in a room with something very old and very hostile, and I did not emerge without a cost.*

She went to church. She sat in the third pew and sang the hymns with the muscle memory of thirty-seven years and received the sermon with the dutiful attention of someone performing an act of faith rather than experiencing one. Afterward she spoke to Gerald in the foyer and he looked at her with the eyes of a man who has seen this before and said, very quietly: "Go home. Rest. Don't try to pray your way out of this. Just let it be."

She drove home. She slept for three hours in the afternoon. She woke to Ezra sitting on her chest with the concerned, self-interested gaze of a cat who has noticed that the person responsible for his dinner is not operating at full capacity.

She fed him. She made soup. She sat at the window watching the November dark come in and she thought about Daniel—her client, eleven years ago, the one she had not escalated. She had not thought about Daniel in weeks. She had done the work, in her own inventory, of bringing him to God and leaving him there. But he was here now, in the November kitchen, and she understood, with a tired clarity, that this was not her own grief returning. This was something else. Something that knew where to press.

## II.

By Tuesday the exhaustion had settled into something she could function through, and the prayer had returned—not in its full strength, but in the way a limb returns after it has been overextended: tender, present, functional. She had called Eze on Monday evening and described what she was experiencing and he had confirmed her assessment with the calm authority of someone delivering a diagnosis they expected:

"You are experiencing what every serious warrior of prayer experiences after significant engagement. The body and spirit are not unlimited resources. You drew deeply on both on Saturday night. What you are feeling is not failure—it is the legitimate aftermath of legitimate work. Rest is not retreat. Rest is rearmament."

He had also said something else, which she had written down and pinned above her desk:

"The Enemy will attempt to use this window. The days after a victory are the days of greatest vulnerability, because the temptation is to believe that the depletion is evidence of defeat. It is not. It is evidence of expenditure. There is a difference. But in the exhaustion, the voice of accusation sounds more authoritative than it does when you are rested. Be careful what you believe about yourself this week."

> *"The accuser of our brethren has been cast down, who accused them before our God day and night." — Revelation 12:10 (NKJV)*

The accusation, when it came, was sophisticated.

It did not come in the night, with the presence at the foot of the bed. Those visits had stopped on the night of the deliverance and had not returned, which she understood as a consequence of the work that had been done. What came instead was subtler and therefore more dangerous: a sustained internal narrative, running beneath her waking hours with the quiet persistence of a low-grade infection, that assembled the evidence of her life into an argument she could not immediately dismiss.

The argument went like this: She was fifty-four years old. She was practicing outside her training. She had entered a domain that her credentials did not cover and had done so without adequate institutional oversight, without the knowledge of her licensing board, without any peer-reviewed evidence base for the interventions she had employed. She had involved vulnerable clients in sessions that could be characterized, by any skeptical colleague, as religious coercion. She had built a team around a methodology that the clinical literature did not recognize. She had exposed the center—Dr. Houser's center, the work of a man she had loved and who had trusted her—to potential liability.

Every element of the argument was drawn from something real. This was what made it effective. The accusations were not fabricated. They were real concerns, legitimate professional questions, facts she had genuinely wrestled with. What made them accusation rather than

discernment was the way they were assembled—not to produce clarity but to produce paralysis. Not to help her do the work better but to convince her to stop doing it at all.

She recognized this. She recognized it the way you recognize a con you've seen before, once someone has named the mechanism.

She called Eze.

## III.

He listened to the full narrative—the professional self-indictment, every element of it—without interrupting. When she finished, he said:

"Which of those things is not true?"

She was quiet for a moment. "None of them. They're all factually accurate."

"And which of them is evidence that you have done wrong?"

She thought carefully. "The work itself—the outcomes for Lydia and Marcus—doesn't look like harm. But the process—the lack of documentation that would satisfy a licensing board, the methods that go beyond my clinical framework—"

"Stop," Eze said. Not harshly. With the precision of someone stopping a person from walking a direction that leads off a cliff. "I want you to notice what is happening. You have just watched two people be set free from bondage that clinical methods alone cannot address. You have done that work carefully, with professional rigor and theological precision and a level of accountability—the team, the pastors, the documentation you have maintained—that most people in this work do not practice. And now, in the window of exhaustion, you are reviewing it not through the lens of what it produced but through the lens of its vulnerability to criticism. That is accusation. That is not discernment."

A silence.

"Discernment asks: did I do this correctly? Accusation asks: can this be used against me. They feel similar in the exhausted mind. They are not the same."

She sat with this for a long moment.

"How do I know which one I'm doing?"

"Ask yourself where the thought leads," Eze said. "Discernment leads to correction and improvement and continued work. Accusation leads to paralysis and withdrawal and the conclusion that the work should not have been done. Follow the destination of the thought, not its origin. The origin may be legitimate. The destination tells you who is driving."

> *"There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit." — Romans 8:1 (NKJV)*

She thanked him and hung up and sat for a long time at her desk with the phone in her hand.

Then she opened her clinical documentation—the careful, precise records she had maintained across every session, every consultation, every decision point in the past two months—and she read through it with fresh eyes. What she saw was not a practitioner who had abandoned her professional standards. She saw a practitioner who had extended her professional framework to account for a dimension her training had not equipped her for, with the same rigor and the same accountability and the same client-centered focus that had characterized her work for twenty-two years.

She thought: the record is clean.

She thought: the outcomes are real.

She thought: I will not stop.

## IV.

The formal complaint arrived on Thursday.

It came by email—forwarded from the center's general inbox to her professional account, flagged as requiring her attention. It was from the husband of a former client—a woman Peggy had seen briefly two years ago, three sessions, terminated by mutual agreement when it became clear the client's primary need was marital counseling that required both partners present. The husband had not been involved in those sessions. The complaint alleged that Peggy had engaged his wife in "religious activities during clinical sessions without informed consent" and had "promoted a specific theological worldview as clinical treatment."

She read it twice. Then she set her phone face-down on the desk and breathed.

The complaint was not frivolous—it was formally constructed and used the correct regulatory language, which told her someone had either done research or received guidance. The allegations themselves were drawn from something real: she did integrate faith into her clinical work, explicitly and by design, and had done so with this client as with all clients who identified as Christian and consented to that integration. The consent was documented. The integration had been within the established scope of Christian counseling as recognized by her certification body.

But formal complaints, regardless of merit, required formal responses. And formal responses required time and attention and the specific kind of energy that she was, this week, least equipped to give.

She called her malpractice carrier. She called the AACC's legal resource line. She pulled the client's file and confirmed the documentation. She forwarded everything to the attorney whose card she kept in her bottom drawer for exactly this kind of moment—a moment she had, in twenty-two years, never needed the card for.

She did all of this with the methodical precision of someone who knows that the most dangerous response to a legal threat is panic, and who has enough professional experience to know that documentation is armor and she had been wearing it all along.

Then she sat back in her chair and looked at the ceiling and said, aloud, to no one visible in the room:

"Is this what we're doing now?"

Not to the complainant. To the one she understood to be behind the timing.

> *"No weapon formed against you shall prosper, and every tongue which rises against you in judgment you shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD." — Isaiah 54:17 (NKJV)*

She had not been afraid in the room with Legion. She had not been afraid in the sessions with Nora and Lydia, in the confrontation with the entity that knew her name. She had been steady and clear and rooted.

A formal complaint with regulatory language made her hands shake.

She noted this with the same clinical honesty she brought to everything. The professional threat landed in a different place than the spiritual one. It threatened not her safety or her faith but her identity—the twenty-two years of careful, credentialed, respected practice that constituted not merely what she did but who she understood herself to be in the world. The Enemy, she thought, had done its research. It knew where she was not wearing armor.

She picked up the phone and called Gerald.

"Pray with me," she said when he answered. Not a request—a need, stated plainly, because she was past the point of managing how she appeared even to people she trusted.

"Right now?"

"Right now."

He prayed for twelve minutes. She did not try to hold herself together during the prayer. She let it come apart, the way things need to come apart sometimes before they can be reassembled correctly, and she held the phone and listened to the prayer of a man she trusted who trusted God, and at the end of the twelve minutes she was still shaking slightly but she was also, beneath the shaking, located. Held. The same thing Nora had described.

Not lost.

## V.

Tamika came to her office on Friday morning and closed the door without being asked to and sat down across the desk with the expression she wore when she had something to say that she had thought carefully about before saying.

"I need to tell you something," Tamika said. "And I need you to hear it as someone who loves you and who works with you and who has watched you for the past two months doing the most significant work I have ever seen done in a professional setting."

Peggy set down her pen. "Say it."

"You are not okay."

The directness of it, from Tamika—who was twenty-nine and her employee and twelve years her junior in every relevant measure—landed with a precision that a gentler phrasing would not have achieved. Peggy opened her mouth and Tamika held up one hand.

"I know you know that. I know you have been managing it and monitoring it and consulting with Pastor Eze and documenting it appropriately and doing all the things that a clinically trained, professionally responsible person does when they are not okay. That is not what I am saying." A pause. "I am saying that you have been carrying this alone in the place where you are most alone, which is the place that no consultation and no documentation can reach. I am saying that I see it. And I am saying that you do not have to pretend, in this building, in front of me, that you are more resourced than you are."

The room was quiet.

Peggy looked at her assistant across the desk. She thought about the morning six weeks ago when she had called Tamika to the break room and asked whether her faith was load-bearing. She thought about Tamika saying: my faith is not decorative. She thought about the way Tamika had stood in that lower hall and prayed without distress and without self-consciousness and with her whole body.

She thought: she earned the right to say this.

"You're right," Peggy said. Simply and without qualification. "I'm not okay. I'm managing. I'm functional. But I am not okay."

Tamika nodded once, receiving this without triumph. "What do you need?"

Peggy thought about it honestly. "Time," she said. "And someone to pray with me who is not trying to assess me while they pray. And—" She stopped. The next thing was harder to say. "I need someone to tell me that what I saw in that room on Saturday was real. Not theologically. I know it was real theologically. I need someone who was there to say it to me out loud, because the week has been—" She gestured vaguely at the space around her. "The week has been working on my certainty."

Tamika looked at her steadily. "It was real," she said. "I was there. I prayed in that room for four hours. I felt what was in there before it left and I felt what came in when it did. It was real, Dr. Walters. Lydia is real. Marcus is real. What happened to them is real. And you are the person God used to make it happen, which means you are a person worth attacking, which means the week you are having is not evidence against the work. It is evidence for it."

> *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile*

> *and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.” — Matthew 5:10–11 (NKJV)*

Peggy was quiet for a long moment.

Then she said: “Thank you.”

Tamika stood. “I’m going to cancel your two o’clock. And I’m going to make you lunch. And this afternoon, when the building is quiet, I’m going to sit with you and we are going to pray. Not because you can’t find your way to prayer alone. But because the Scripture says where two or three are gathered and I take that literally.”

She left the office before Peggy could object, which was probably intentional.

Peggy sat at her desk for a moment. Then she did something she had not done in her office in twenty-two years: she put her head down on her folded arms and she wept. Not from despair. From the specific, enormous relief of being seen accurately by someone who had chosen to see her with love.

## VI.

The doubt, when it arrived in its full form, came not through accusation or exhaustion or legal threat but through a conversation she had not anticipated and could not have prepared for.

It came from Dr. Eleanor Marsh.

Eleanor was her supervisor—the woman she reported to at the Virginia Board of Counseling, a clinical psychologist with thirty years of practice and the measured, evidence-based perspective of someone who had built her career on the bedrock of empirical rigor. She was not, as far as Peggy knew, a person of faith. She was a person of extraordinary professional integrity, which Peggy respected equally. They had a collegial relationship built on mutual respect across fifteen years and no fundamental disagreement about anything that mattered professionally.

Eleanor called on Friday afternoon. Not a scheduled call. Not a routine supervision check-in. She said she was calling because she had received, through professional channels, information about Peggy’s recent client work and wanted to discuss it directly before anything became formal.

The conversation lasted forty minutes.

Eleanor was not hostile. She was precise. She asked Peggy to describe, in clinical terms, the interventions she had employed with Lydia Crane and Nora Ellison. She listened without interrupting. She asked three clarifying questions, each one careful and fair. And then she said, with the same precision and the same absence of hostility:

"Peggy, I have known you for fifteen years. I believe you are one of the finest practitioners I have supervised in my career. I am not calling to sanction you. I am calling because I am concerned. What you have described — the behavioral phenomena in the sessions, the organizational response you coordinated, the interventions you employed — these are not within any clinical framework I am familiar with. And I need you to consider the possibility—as a professional, not as a person of faith—that what you witnessed was not what you believe you witnessed."

A silence.

"What do you believe I witnessed?" Peggy asked.

"Severe dissociative presentations, possibly trauma-induced. Shared delusional frameworks between client and counselor. The power of expectation and belief in producing behavioral phenomena that are then interpreted through a preexisting theological lens. These are documented and well-studied phenomena, Peggy. They are not beyond explanation."

Another silence. Longer.

"Eleanor," Peggy said carefully, "I have been a clinical counselor for twenty-two years. I know the presentations you are describing. I have treated them. I have documented them. And I am telling you, as a professional with twenty-two years of pattern recognition, that what I witnessed in those sessions was not within the range of any dissociative, delusional, or conversion presentation I have encountered in two decades of practice. I am not saying this because I am predisposed to a theological explanation. I am saying it because the clinical explanation is insufficient. The phenomena exceeded the framework."

Eleanor was quiet for a moment. "I hear you," she said. And Peggy believed that she did—that Eleanor Marsh was genuinely listening, genuinely weighing, genuinely open. "I am not in a position to evaluate what I didn't observe. What I can tell you is that the professional path forward requires very careful documentation and very careful management of the boundary between your clinical practice and your personal faith. If those boundaries blur—even with the best intentions—the vulnerability is significant."

"I understand," Peggy said.

After the call ended she sat for a very long time.

Not because Eleanor had shaken her conviction. She had not. But because Eleanor had done something more significant: she had presented the doubt from its most credible direction. Not the accusatory whisper at three in the morning. Not the entity in the room with its catalogue of her failures. A person she respected, with credentials she respected, speaking from a position of genuine care, offering an explanation that was not malicious and was not stupid and that she could not dismiss without engaging seriously.

She engaged it seriously.

> *"For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." — 1 Corinthians 13:12 (KJV)*

She sat with Eleanor's framework for two hours. She applied it honestly to every session, every manifestation, every moment of the past two months. She asked herself: is there a clinical explanation I have not adequately considered? Is there a way in which my faith has preceded my discernment rather than informing it? Is there a reading of these events in which Eleanor is right and I am wrong?

And she arrived, at the end of those two hours, at the same place she had arrived at the beginning: the clinical framework was insufficient. Not because she was biased toward the theological. Because the data required more than the clinical framework could hold. Because Lydia Crane, three weeks after the deliverance session, was sleeping through the night and worshipping in church without incident and had—by her husband's account and her own—not experienced a single recurrence of the symptoms that had brought her to the center. Because Marcus Tilley was sleeping and eating and returning to school and had told his grandmother, with the specific vocabulary of a seventeen-year-old who is not given to poetry, that the noise in his head had stopped.

Not reduced. Stopped.

She thought: I will maintain the documentation. I will maintain the professional boundaries. I will engage seriously with every legitimate critique of my methods. And I will not stop.

She wrote one line in her journal that evening:

> *Eleanor is a good woman and a careful thinker and she is wrong about this. Not because she lacks intelligence or integrity — she has both in abundance. But because some things cannot be seen from outside the room. The clinical framework is a window. It is not the whole view. I am grateful for the window. I am also grateful for the door.*

## VII.

Nora Ellison was baptized on the second Sunday of November.

The service was at Calvary Bible, in the afternoon, after the morning worship had concluded and the sanctuary had been restored to the quiet that precedes significant events. Gerald officiated. Carol Briggs stood beside Nora with her hand on the young woman's arm. Dottie Tilley was in the front pew with Marcus, who was wearing a collared shirt for the first time Peggy had ever seen him in one and who sat through the service with the particular quality of attention of someone for whom church has recently become a different kind of place.

Lydia and David Crane were there. Lydia sat in the middle of the sanctuary with her hands folded in her lap and her face carrying the expression that Peggy had come to think of as her true face—the dry humor and the fierce intelligence and the deep warmth, all present simultaneously, unhidden and unhurried.

Tamika was there. Marjorie was there. Pastor Anthony Webb was there, and two of the pastors from the meeting Gerald had convened, and six of Dottie's intercessors, and Carol's husband, and a young woman from the university who had been Nora's roommate before everything collapsed and who had driven three hours to be present, which Nora had described to Peggy with the specific, slightly overwhelmed expression of someone who is learning, for the first time in a long time, that people love her.

Peggy sat in the third pew from the front on the left side.

Gerald led Nora through the declaration of faith—the simple, ancient questions that the Church has asked new believers since the beginning, the ones that are not complex and are not decorated and that carry in their plainness the full weight of what they mean. Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God? Do you repent of your sins and turn to Him as Lord and Savior? Do you intend to follow Him?

Nora said yes to each one.

Not loudly. Not with the performed conviction of someone doing this for an audience. She said yes the way she had said everything that mattered in the months Peggy had known her: with the precise, unadorned honesty of a young woman who has learned, at considerable cost, the difference between a word that is real and one that is not.

Gerald lowered her into the water.

She came up.

Peggy would think afterward about what Nora had said in the doorway of the lower hall after the deliverance night: the leaving looks like a storm, the coming in looks like breathing. She looked at Nora's face when she surfaced from the water and she thought: yes. Exactly that. A young woman breathing. Fully, cleanly, for the first time.

> *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." — 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NKJV)*

Afterward, in the fellowship hall, over coffee and the kind of food that appears at church gatherings with the generous efficiency of people who understand that bodies need feeding at significant moments, Nora found Peggy in the corner where she had retreated to simply stand and feel the weight of the day.

"I want to say something," Nora said.

"Say it."

"I know this week has been hard for you. Carol told me about the complaint, and I can see—" She stopped. Started again. "I just want you to know that I am standing here in this room because you opened a door for me. Not the kind that should stay closed. The other kind. The kind that leads somewhere. And whatever this week has cost you—whatever this whole season has cost you—I need you to know that it was not wasted. It was not."

Peggy looked at her. The young woman who had arrived barefoot on a porch in September, pale and frightened and occupied by something that was not her. Standing in front of her now in the fellowship hall of Calvary Bible Church, wet-haired and clear-eyed and entirely, irreducibly herself.

"I know," Peggy said. And she did. For the first time all week, she did.

## VIII.

She drove home from the baptism in the thin November light that comes at four o'clock when the sun is already making its early exit and the sky is the color of old pewter and the trees are bare and the world has the particular stripped beauty of a season that has given everything and is not ashamed of what remains.

She thought about the week.

The exhaustion, the silence at the place where prayer lived, the professional accusation, the formal complaint, the conversation with Eleanor, the doubt that had come not from a dark voice but from a respected colleague with good intentions. She thought about Tamika's directness and Gerald's twelve minutes and Eze's instruction about the destination of thoughts.

She thought about what it meant to be a wounded warrior.

She had used the phrase in conference talks before—usually in the context of counselor self-care, the occupational hazards of sitting with others' pain, the secondary trauma that accumulates in the helping professions. She had used it as a clinical concept. She was discovering that it was also a theological one. That the New Testament was populated, from beginning to end, with wounded people doing significant work: Paul with his thorn, Peter with his denial, Elijah under the juniper tree asking God to let him die, Jeremiah weeping over his calling, John the Baptist in prison sending messengers to ask whether Jesus was really the One.

The doubt was not disqualifying. The exhaustion was not failure. The cost was not evidence against the calling. It was, as Eze had said, evidence of expenditure. And expenditure meant something had been spent on something worth spending it on.

> *"But He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold." — Job 23:10 (NKJV)*

She thought about Lydia sleeping through the night. Marcus hearing silence where there had been noise. Nora, wet-haired, in the fellowship hall, saying: it was not wasted.

She thought: this is what it costs. And it is worth every cent.

She pulled into her driveway as the last of the light was leaving the sky. She sat in the car for a moment with the engine off and the quiet of the November evening around her and she prayed—not the careful, structured prayer of someone who has organized their approach to God, but the simple, direct prayer of someone who is tired and has done hard things and trusts the One they are speaking to:

"Thank you. I am worn out. Restore me. And when I am restored—tell me what comes next."

She went inside. She fed Ezra, who greeted her with the measured enthusiasm of a cat who has decided, after long consideration, that she is worth acknowledging. She made tea. She sat at the kitchen table with her journal and she did not write the doubts or the costs or the professional anxiety. She wrote the things that were true:

> *Lydia is free. Marcus is free. Nora is baptized. The pastors of this community are talking to each other about things they had not named before. The prayer canopy over this center has not lifted in three weeks. And I am still standing. Wounded, yes. Tired, yes. Uncertain about some things, yes. But standing. And He has not—in fifty-four years, in every season of this life, in the hardest rooms I have entered and the longest nights I have kept—He has not once failed to be sufficient. Not once. I will stand on that tomorrow. And the day after. And as many days as He requires.*

She closed the journal.

She thought about what comes next, and she did not know precisely, and for the first time in a very long time that was all right. Not knowing precisely was not the same as not knowing at all. She knew the direction. She knew the authority. She knew the name.

That, she had learned this autumn, was enough.

It had always been enough.

❖ ❖ ❖

*End of Chapter Nine*

## CHAPTER TEN

# *The Battle Within*

*The Final Chapter*

> *"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." — Galatians 2:20 (NKJV)*

> *"And all the angels shall execute their commands and shall seek to hide themselves from the presence of the Great Glory, and the children of earth shall tremble and quake; and you shall have no peace.' Rejoice not over the righteous ones; but know ye, that their portion is prepared before the Lord of Spirits." — 1 Enoch 102:3–3 (R.H. Charles translation)*

### I.

December came to Clarksburg with the quiet authority of a season that has nothing left to prove.

The oaks along Meridian Street had released their last leaves weeks ago and stood now in their winter plainness—stripped and angular against the gray sky, their structure fully visible in a way that summer's fullness concealed. Peggy had always loved the trees in December for this reason: the removal of the decorative revealed the architecture. You could see, in the bare and honest lines of branch and trunk, exactly what the tree was made of and how it had been built to stand.

She had been thinking about architecture a great deal lately.

It was six weeks since the night of the deliverance, five weeks since Nora's baptism, four weeks since the formal complaint had been reviewed and dismissed by the licensing board—her documentation had been, as her attorney put it with the dry satisfaction of someone who rarely gets to deliver unambiguous good news, thorough to the point of being inarguable. The prayer canopy over New Hope remained active, tended by the rotating intercessors whose commitment

had not flagged in the weeks since Gerald had organized them. Raymond Okafor's voice had stopped. Carla Simmons had begun, in session, the careful excavation of her Haitian grandmother's spiritual legacy, which Peggy was navigating with the experience she had not possessed in September and the humility she hoped she would never lose.

Sandra Beaumont had not missed a session. The accuser had not returned to her bedroom.

Marcus Tilley was passing his history class. This detail, reported by Dottie with the specific, contained pride of a grandmother who has seen her grandson restored to himself, was the one that made Peggy's eyes fill in the telling. Not the deliverance, not the dramatic moments in the room. Marcus Tilley, passing history. The ordinary achievement of a freed life resuming its ordinary course. That was the point of all of it. That was what it was for.

She had written a paper.

Not for publication—not yet, and perhaps not ever in its current form. But she had written, over the course of November, a careful and precisely documented account of the work of the past three months: the clinical presentations, the theoretical framework that accounted for what the standard clinical framework could not, the protocols she and Eze had developed, the outcomes. She had written it with the rigor of the clinical researcher she had been trained to be and the honesty of a woman who had stood in the room and was not willing to pretend she had not.

She had sent it to Eze, who had read it carefully and returned it with seven handwritten notes in the margins and the single line: "This is necessary. Someone must write it. You are the right person."

She had not decided yet what to do with it. She was sitting with it, the way she sat with important things: patiently, in the presence of God, waiting for the clarity that always came when she was willing to wait.

> *"But those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." — Isaiah 40:31 (NKJV)*

## II.

The conference had been Gerald's idea.

He had proposed it in the third week of November, in the weekly team meeting, with the practical vision of a man who has spent forty years turning significant experiences into transmittable knowledge: "What has happened in this community over the past three months is not only for this community. The pastors who sat around that table learned something. The intercessors who have been holding this covering learned something. You—" He had looked at Peggy. "You have learned something that practitioners in a hundred communities need to know. We should hold a conference."

Peggy had resisted, initially, with the resistance of a private person who has done hard and holy work and is not entirely comfortable with the idea of presenting it from a platform. Gerald had received the resistance with the patience of a man who knew it was temporary.

"This is not about your story," he had said. "It is about equipping the Church to do what the Church is called to do. The pastoral community of Clarksburg walked into a battle without a framework. They needed one. Every pastoral community in this country is in the same position. You have a framework. And you have outcomes. You have a clinical counselor, a deliverance minister, a prayer team, and a community of churches who worked together and saw people freed. That is not a story for one town. That is a model."

Eze, when she called him, had said: "Gerald is right. Go."

Ruth, when she called her sister, had said: "Of course. When?"

Tamika, when she told her, had said nothing but had immediately begun a spreadsheet, which Peggy understood as the highest form of assistant affirmation.

The conference was scheduled for the last weekend of February, at Calvary Bible Church, and would bring together pastors, Christian counselors, intercessors, and medical professionals from across the region. Its title, which Peggy had spent two weeks arriving at and which she had finally found in the stripping-down of everything unnecessary, was three words:

## THE BATTLE WITHIN

*Faith, Formation, and the Fight for Human Freedom*

She had chosen the title not because it named the external battle—the principalities and powers, the entities named and commanded in the sessions, the territorial engagement Eze had

identified across the community. She had chosen it because of what she had come to understand, in the quiet weeks of December, about where the deepest battle was fought.

Not in the rooms with the possessed. Within the counselor. Within the pastor. Within every human being who chose to engage darkness on behalf of another person, or who simply chose, in the ordinary battles of an ordinary life, to orient toward God rather than away from Him.

That was where the real fighting happened. In the heart. In the will. In the space between what a person was and what they were becoming.

The battle within was not a metaphor. It was the primary theater.

## III.

She understood this more fully because of a conversation she had not planned to have.

It happened in the second week of December, in the quiet of a Wednesday afternoon when the center was between appointments and the December light lay thin and pale across the carpet of her office and Ezra—who had taken, in the past weeks, to accompanying her to the office on days when Tamika drove her, in what Peggy privately interpreted as the cat's own form of intercessory support—was asleep on the radiator with the specific peace of a creature that has never known spiritual warfare and is unlikely to.

Marcus Tilley knocked on her door.

He was not scheduled. He had come in with his grandmother for Dottie's weekly prayer watch—Dottie had become, in the weeks since the deliverance, one of the center's most faithful intercessors, arriving at seven every Wednesday morning and praying through the building with the unhurried thoroughness of someone who has found her most productive assignment—and he had waited until Dottie was occupied and then he had walked to Peggy's door and knocked with the specific hesitancy of a seventeen-year-old who has something to say and is not certain it will land the way he means it.

Peggy opened the door and waved him in and he sat in the window chair—Lydia's chair, the chair from which so much of this had begun—and he looked at her with the eyes that had been frightened and closed when he arrived in October and were now, she could see clearly, open.

"I want to ask you something," he said.

"Ask."

He turned his cap in his hands—the nervous fidgeting of someone buying time. "The thing that was in me. The thing you and Pastor Eze and my grandma prayed out of me. It's gone, right? Like—completely?"

"Yes," Peggy said. Carefully, because she wanted to be precise. "Desolation was commanded to leave and it left. The door through which it entered has been closed and renounced and covered by the blood of Christ. You are not carrying what you were carrying in October."

He nodded slowly. "So then why—" He stopped. Started again. "Why do I still sometimes—why do I still sometimes want to do the wrong thing? Why is there still a fight inside me? If it's gone, shouldn't it be… quiet?"

The question sat in the room with the weight of something important.

Peggy looked at Marcus Tilley and she thought: this is the question. This is the one underneath all the others. The one that the spiritual warfare literature rarely addresses with the honesty it deserves, because the answer is not dramatic and does not require an entity and cannot be resolved in a single session.

She thought about how to answer it in a way that was true and also held.

> *"For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish." — Galatians 5:17 (NKJV)*

"Marcus," she said, "let me tell you something that the Church sometimes forgets to say clearly enough. The deliverance—what happened in that room in November—was real. It was complete. What was in you is not in you. That battle is over and it was won." She paused. "But there is another battle. And this one has been going on since the fall of humanity and will continue until the return of Christ and it is the battle that every human being who has ever drawn breath has fought every day of their life."

He was listening with the complete attention of a young man who has learned to take seriously what serious people say seriously.

"It's the battle within your own nature," she said. "Not demonic. Human. The part of you that wants what is not good for you, that reaches for the easy thing rather than the right thing, that chooses self over God when the choice is hard. Paul calls it the flesh. Not the body—the old nature. The pattern of wanting and deciding that runs contrary to the Spirit. And that battle—" She leaned forward slightly. "That battle is not resolved by deliverance. It is fought every day. One choice at a time. One surrender at a time. That is what the Christian life is."

Marcus was quiet for a long moment.

"So it never gets easier?"

"It gets different," she said. "You get stronger. You get more practiced at recognizing the choice before you make the wrong one. You build a history with God—a record of times you chose right and He came through, and that record becomes the foundation of the next choice. It is not that the battle ends. It is that the warrior grows."

He sat with this.

"So what I felt in October—the thing riding me—that was one battle. And what I feel now, when I want to do the wrong thing—that's a different battle."

"Yes," she said. "And the second one is the longer one. And in some ways the harder one. Because it requires not one dramatic night in a room with a prayer team. It requires the rest of your life."

He nodded. And she watched him, in the nodding, accept this—not as a burden but as an assignment. The particular acceptance of a young person who has understood, perhaps for the first time, what they are actually signing up for.

"Okay," Marcus said. "I can do that."

## IV.

She wrote about the conversation with Marcus in her journal that evening and in the paper she was drafting, and it became—she recognized this as she wrote it—the theological center of everything she had experienced in the past three months. The thing she had been working toward without knowing it. The understanding that the extraordinary events of October and November—the sessions, the entities, the deliverances, the night in the lower hall—were not the main story. They were the dramatic foreground of a quieter, longer, more

fundamental story about the battle that happens in every human heart, with or without a demon in the room.

She had gone into this work as a clinical counselor who had added a spiritual dimension to her practice. She was coming out of it as something she did not have a clean professional title for: a person who had stood at the intersection of the clinical and the spiritual and had seen them meet and had understood, at that meeting point, something about the nature of human beings that neither framework alone could convey.

Human beings were battlegrounds. Every one. Not all were occupied by external entities in the way that Lydia and Marcus and Nora had been. But all were sites of the fundamental contest between the old nature and the new, between the self that reaches away from God and the self that reaches toward Him. Between flesh and Spirit. Between the voice of the accuser and the voice of the Advocate.

This was the battle within.

And it was fought not with the dramatic tools of deliverance—renunciation, command, the name spoken in authority—but with the ordinary, daily, completely unglamorous tools of the Christian life: prayer, Scripture, community, confession, the body and blood received at the table, the choice made in the kitchen at six in the morning before anyone is watching, the surrender practiced so many times it begins to feel less like surrender and more like coming home.

> *"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." — Romans 12:1–2 (NKJV)*

She thought about what it meant that God had used her—specifically her, with her specific history and her specific wounds and her specific training and her specific twenty-two years of sitting with the darkest rooms of human experience—for this work. She had been, in September, a competent counselor with a strong faith and a well-ordered prayer life. By December she was something she could not fully describe but that she recognized from the inside as different in the way that refined is different from raw: the same material, transformed by the application of heat.

She thought about the inventory she had done in early October—the ruthless examination of her own unclosed rooms, the divorce, the pastor, Daniel. She thought about the way that work had been not a preliminary to the battle but part of it. The clearing of her own interior before she could lead others through theirs.

She thought about the night in the lower hall and the name Desolation and the moment Dottie Tilley had spoken four words that changed the room. She thought about Lydia's eyes when she surfaced from the entity's occupation—the specific, unmistakable quality of a person returned to themselves. She thought about Marcus saying: is it always going to feel like this? Like I can breathe?

She thought about all of it as a gift. Not an easy gift—not the kind you unwrap with delight—but the kind that can only be given through the giving of the Giver Himself, at the cost the Giver bore, in the territory where the Giver had already gone before.

She thought: I understand the cross better than I did in September. Not as doctrine—I understood it as doctrine for thirty-seven years. As reality. As the operative center of everything I have done and seen and been this autumn. The one who went into the darkest room first. Who bore the weight of every name that ever named itself in a human life. Who said it is finished, and meant it in every realm—spiritual, covenantal, legal, eternal—where it needed to be finished.

She thought: that is what I have been saying yes to all along.

> *"When He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints." — Revelation 5:8 (NKJV)*

## V.

She met with Lydia Crane on the second Friday of December for what they both understood, without naming it, to be their final clinical session.

Not the end of the relationship—they had moved, in the way that significant shared experience moves people, into a different kind of regard for each other that was not the clinical dynamic and was not quite friendship and was something she did not have an established

category for. The category of people who have stood together in significant moments and come through changed and remain connected by the change.

Lydia arrived with the ease of a woman who has been sleeping. The difference between the person who had stood at the break room window in the rain in October and the person who sat across from Peggy now was the difference between a landscape under pressure and the same landscape under light. Same terrain. Completely different quality of visibility.

"I want to tell you something," Lydia said. "Before we—before this changes. I want to say it while we're still in the room."

"Say it."

"I spent a long time—years, honestly—being angry at God about the family I was born into. The grandmother I never chose. The inheritance I didn't ask for. I used to think: why didn't He protect me? Why did He let me be born into a line that had opened those doors before I existed?" She paused. "I don't have a tidy answer to that. I'm not going to pretend I do. But I have something I didn't have before."

"What do you have?"

"I have the knowledge that He didn't abandon me to it. That He let me be born into that line and He also arranged every single thing that had to happen for me to end up in this room with you, in this season, at the moment when the Church in this town was finally ready to fight. That's not an accident. That is a plan." She looked at Peggy directly, with the fierce intelligence that was her truest characteristic. "I was supposed to be Lydia Crane. With this history. In this town. In this year. And so were you."

The room was quiet.

Peggy looked at this woman—the woman who had arrived in her center eight weeks ago unable to worship in her own church, whose husband had watched helplessly as something wore his wife's face, who had stood at a window in the rain with her lips moving and her eyes somewhere else. Who had sat in a chair in the lower hall of a church on a November Saturday night and spoken her freedom into the air of the room in a voice that was entirely and irreducibly her own.

She thought: Lydia Crane is the reason I became a counselor.

She thought: I just didn't know that until now.

> *"And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."*
> *— Romans 8:28 (NKJV)*

## VI.

She drove to Charlottesville on the third Saturday of December to spend the morning with William Eze.

They met at Redeemer's House, in his book-lined study, with coffee between them and the winter quiet outside the window. She had brought the paper. He had a new notebook—not the worn one from their first meeting but a fresh one, which she interpreted as a statement about the stage of the work.

They talked for three hours. Not about the cases—those had been thoroughly documented and prayed over and were, by every measure, in the hands of God and the ongoing community that had formed around them. They talked about what came next. About the conference in February. About the paper. About the question that Peggy had been carrying since November and had not asked anyone yet because she had not been sure how to ask it without sounding either arrogant or naive:

"Is this—what I've been doing—is this my assignment? Permanently? Or is this a season?"

Eze considered the question with the specific patience of a man who does not answer important questions quickly. He turned his coffee cup in his hands. He looked at the window.

"What is the difference, for you, between those two things?" he asked.

She thought about it. "A season has an end. An assignment has a—a continuation. A deepening. A permanent reorientation of the work."

"And which do you believe this is?"

She was quiet for a long moment.

"I think," she said slowly, "that I went into this as a counselor who had an encounter with the spiritual. And I think I am coming out of it as something that I don't have a clean title for, which is a counselor and a person of spiritual authority and a practitioner who works at the intersection of those two things. And I think—" She stopped. "I think the paper is not the end

of the work. I think the conference is not the end of the work. I think whatever the work is, I am at the beginning of it, not the conclusion."

Eze looked at her.

"Then you have answered your own question," he said.

A pause.

"I want to tell you something that I have not told you before," he said. "Because you are far enough in that it will not distort the work, and because you have earned the right to hear it." He set down his coffee. "In twenty years of this ministry, I have encountered perhaps six people who had the specific combination of gifts that this work requires. The clinical training. The theological formation. The prayer life. The love—which is not sentiment but the operative willingness to enter another person's darkness at personal cost. The humility to hold authority without being seduced by it. The courage to stand in the room without requiring the room to be anything other than what it is." He paused. "You have all of it. You have had it for years. This autumn was not the creation of something new in you. It was the activation of what was already there."

She held what he said for a long moment.

"I don't know what to do with that," she said honestly.

"You don't have to do anything with it," he said. "Except continue. One case at a time. One person at a time. One room at a time. The work is not spectacular, most days. It is what yours has always been: showing up, listening, praying, bringing the authority of Christ to bear in the specific and particular circumstances of specific and particular lives. You have simply been given more of the territory to do it in."

> *"And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying: 'Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down.'" — Revelation 12:10 (NKJV)*

## VII.

On the last day of the year, in the quiet hour before midnight, Peggy Walters sat at her kitchen table and wrote what she called her summation.

It was not a summary of the events of the autumn—she had documented those thoroughly elsewhere. It was an attempt to name, in the most honest and precise language she possessed, what she had learned. Not theologically—she would write the theology for the conference and the paper. Personally. What she, Peggy Anne Walters, age fifty-four, twenty-two years a counselor, thirty-seven years a Christian, had been taught by the past four months.

She wrote for two hours.

When she finished, she read it back slowly. Then she copied the essential truths—the ones that had cost the most to learn and that she would, she knew, spend the rest of her working life trying to transmit to others—onto a separate page in her careful hand. She titled the page simply:

**WHAT I HAVE LEARNED**

> **I. The battle is real.** *Not metaphorical, not psychological, not the projection of human darkness onto a convenient supernatural screen. Real. Principalities and powers and spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places are real in the same way that the Holy Spirit is real — which is to say, more real than anything I can touch. I spent thirty-seven years believing this theologically. I now believe it operationally.*

> **II. The authority is real.** *The name of Jesus Christ is not an incantation or a cultural artifact or a comforting religious expression. It is the name above every name, before which every principality and power and entity that names itself must yield. I have seen this. I have stood in the room while it happened. The authority is not mine — I am a vessel, a representative, a servant of the One who holds it. But it has been delegated, and it works, and no room I enter in His name is a room He has not already occupied.*

> **III. The greatest battle is within.** *The most significant spiritual warfare does not happen in the session with the possessed client. It happens in the counselor's own heart, in the daily choosing of surrender over self, obedience over comfort, faith over the evidence of the senses. Every person I have worked with this autumn was fighting*

*an external battle that mirrored an internal one. The external entity could be removed. The internal battle continued. That is the longer fight. That is the one that sanctifies.*

**IV. Surrender is the strategy.** *I came into this work as a competent, credentialed professional who added prayer to her practice. I am leaving this season as a practitioner who has learned that competence and credentials are tools, not authority, and that the moment I begin to operate from my own resources rather than His is the moment the work becomes mine and stops being His — which is the moment it becomes inadequate. Surrender is not weakness. It is the only posture from which the full authority of Christ can flow through a human vessel. This is the paradox of 2 Corinthians 12:9: My strength is made perfect in weakness.*

**V. Love is the operative principle.** *Gerald said it in October and I have not stopped turning it over: the Enemy fears love the way it fears the name of Christ, because love is the operating principle of the One who defeated it. I entered every session this autumn primarily because I love the people in front of me. Not sentimentally — with the costly, specific, entering-into love that is the functional definition of charity in 1 Corinthians 13. This love is not generated by the counselor. It is the love of God, flowing through a vessel that has made itself available. My job is the availability.*

**VI. The Church is the body.** *I could not have done any of this alone. The team, the prayer canopy, the pastors around the table, the intercessors who held the covering, the pastor's wife who housed Nora, the husband who held his wife through the worst night of their lives — all of it was the body of Christ functioning as the body of Christ. I am not a solitary warrior and I was never meant to be. The individual gifting is deployed within the communal structure. Where the structure is absent, the gifting is exposed. The Church, functioning as the Church, is the most powerful entity on earth.*

**VII. The victory is already won.** *Everything I encountered this autumn — every entity, every manifestation, every name, every claim of ancient right and legal standing — was operating in a territory that has already been conquered. The Cross was the decisive engagement. What happens in deliverance sessions and prayer meetings and hospital rooms and counseling offices is not the determination of the outcome — the outcome has been determined. It is the enforcement of a victory already secured. We are not fighting for victory. We are fighting from it. This changes everything about how you stand in the room.*

She set down the pen.

She looked at the page for a long time.

Outside the kitchen window, the last night of the year held Clarksburg in the particular quiet of a town that has gone mostly to bed before the turning, the streets empty and the sky dark and the December cold pressing against the glass with the patient indifference of weather.

Ezra was on the chair beside her, asleep with the complete peace of a creature unburdened by the knowledge of his own mortality or the existence of spiritual warfare, and she was grateful for his company in the way she was grateful for all the small, ordinary anchors of her life: the coffee mug, the kitchen light, the journal, the bare oaks she could not see but knew were there beyond the dark of the window, stripped to their architecture, standing in the winter with the honest structure of things that have been built to endure.

## VIII.

She turned the page in her journal and she wrote the final entry of the year. Not a summary. Not a list of lessons. A prayer. The longest she had written in a journal that contained thirty-seven years of them, and the most true.

> *December 31st. Lord — I am fifty-four years old and I have spent the past four months in rooms I did not expect to enter, doing work I did not expect to do, standing in authority I did not know I possessed, watching You set free people I did not know I would meet. I am not the person I was in September. I don't think I was supposed to be. I have learned this autumn that the battle is real and the authority is real and the victory is already decided, and that my job in all of it is smaller and more important than I knew: to show up. To surrender. To love the person in front of me with whatever portion of Your love I can carry. To speak Your name when it needs to be spoken and to listen in the silence when speaking is not the thing required. To hold the line and to hold it standing and to remember, when I am most depleted, that I am not the one holding it. The battle within — the one I have been naming and thinking about and writing toward — is not only the battle in the room. It is the battle in my own chest. The daily choosing of You over myself. The surrender that is required not once, not on the dramatic nights, but every ordinary morning when I wake and have to decide, again, who I am and whose I am and what that means for the day in front of me. That is the battle. That is the only battle, finally. And it is won the same way every time: not by my strength, not by my training, not by my credentials or my courage or my careful prayer life, but by Your grace, which is*

> *sufficient, and by Your strength, which is made perfect in my weakness, and by the name of the One who went into the darkest room in the universe and came out the other side holding the keys. I am Yours. I have always been Yours. I will be Yours when this work is finished and when I am finished and when the morning comes that has no evening. Until then: I am here. I am willing. Tell me what comes next. In the name that is above every name — Peggy*

She closed the journal.

She turned off the kitchen light.

She stood at the dark window for a moment, looking out at the December night, and she felt—not for the first time this autumn, but more completely than ever before—the specific, irreducible quality of a life that is held. Not controlled, not managed, not insulated from difficulty or cost or the presence of real darkness in the world. Held. The way a bird is held by the current of the air—not gripped, not confined, but supported at every point of its flight by something it cannot see and has learned to trust.

She went to bed.

She slept deeply and without interruption and at 3:17 in the morning the darkness was only darkness and the house was only a house and the silence was only silence and all of it, every ordinary and extraordinary inch of it, belonged to God.

In the morning—the first morning of the new year, clear and cold and lit with the particular blue-white light of a January sun on frost—she woke early. She made coffee. She sat at the kitchen table with her Bible and the journal and the page of seven lessons and Ezra warm on the chair beside her.

She prayed.

The words came easily. They always came in the morning, after the night. That was how it worked: the night was the testing, and the morning was the returning, and the returning was always—had been always, across fifty-four years of mornings—a mercy.

She thought about the day ahead. The sessions she would hold. The clients she would meet. The ordinary work of listening and caring and bringing whatever she had to bear on whatever was in front of her. She thought about the conference in February and the paper and the phone call she needed to make to the pastor in Roanoke who had reached out through Gerald, whose congregation had a situation he did not have language for.

She thought: there is more work.

She thought: of course there is.

She thought: good.

She rose from the table. She picked up her satchel and her Bible and her thermos of dark coffee and she checked that her keys were in her coat pocket and she looked, on her way out the door, at the bare December trees against the January sky.

She thought: stripped to their architecture. Built to endure.

She thought: yes.

And she drove to the center.

❖ ❖ ❖

*End of Chapter Ten*

## CHAPTER ELEVEN
# *The Ancient Doorway*

> *"Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret." — Ephesians 5:11–12 (NIV)*

> *"And Azazel taught men to make swords, and knives, and shields, and breastplates, and made known to them the metals of the earth and the art of working them. And there arose much godlessness, and they committed fornication, and they were led astray, and became corrupt." — 1 Enoch 8:1 (R.H. Charles translation)*

# I.

The conference brochure was still warm from the printer when the letter arrived.

It came in a standard white envelope, hand-addressed in a deliberate, old-fashioned script that Tamika had noted before she brought it to Peggy's desk—noted it because of the quality of the handwriting, not its content, which she had not seen. It was addressed to Dr. Peggy Walters, New Hope Counseling Center, Clarksburg, Virginia, and the return address was a post office box in a town called Hallow's Creek, fourteen miles east of Clarksburg in the foothills of the Appalachians, a town so small that Peggy had driven through it twice in her life and retained nothing of it except the impression of old houses and older trees and a silence of the particular kind that settles over places where the modern world has not quite arrived.

She opened it at her desk on a Tuesday morning in the third week of January, with her coffee untouched beside her and the conference brochure—THE BATTLE WITHIN: Faith, Formation, and the Fight for Human Freedom, February 22–24—face-up on the corner of the desk where she had been reviewing the session schedule.

The letter was two pages, handwritten on plain paper in the same deliberate script as the address. The writer identified himself as Pastor Elias Croft of the Shepherd's Gate Fellowship in Hallow's Creek—not the Elias she knew, not Pastor Elias of Bethel Chapel, a different man—and he wrote with the measured, careful urgency of someone who has been composing this letter in his head for a long time and is now, finally, writing it because he has run out of reasons not to.

He had heard about the conference through a contact at Calvary Bible. He had heard, through the same contact, about the work Peggy had been doing. He was writing because he had a situation in his congregation that he did not have language for and that had been worsening for six months and that he was now, after six months of prayer and study and consultation with colleagues who had not been able to help him, prepared to describe to someone who might.

He described it across two handwritten pages with a precision that told Peggy he was an educated man: multiple congregants presenting with disturbances—behavioral, psychological, spiritual—that had begun within the same six-month window. Not the same symptoms. The same quality of underlying disturbance. Several of them knew each other, which he had initially considered coincidental. He no longer considered it coincidental.

And then, at the bottom of the second page, the sentence that caused Peggy to set the letter flat on her desk and sit back in her chair and breathe slowly for a long moment:

***"Three of them have mentioned, independently and without prompting, the same name. They call it the Order of the Hollow Gate."***

She picked up the phone and called Gerald.

## II.

She called Eze next. He listened to the letter's contents without interrupting and when she finished there was a silence of twelve seconds—she counted, because she had learned to measure Eze's silences as an index of the weight of what he was processing.

"How many of your current clients have connections to the Clarksburg–Hallow's Creek corridor?" he asked.

The question landed with the precision of a surgical instrument. She had not thought to frame it that way. She thought about it now, turning her caseload in her mind with the focused attention of someone running a search pattern.

"Raymond Okafor grew up in Hallow's Creek," she said. "He moved to Clarksburg for his teaching position twelve years ago. His wife—the one who died—was from there originally. Carla Simmons's parents lived in that area until she was eight." She paused. "And Lydia's aunt—the one whose estate she settled when the symptoms began—her house was in Hallow's Creek. That's where the objects came from."

Silence.

"I need you to look at this as a map," Eze said. "Not as coincidence and not as confirmed pattern—yet. But as a map that may have a center. The question is what is at the center."

"The Order of the Hollow Gate," Peggy said.

"Perhaps. Or whatever that name refers to. Names like that are often given to something much older than the name. Tell me—when Lydia described the objects from her aunt's estate, did she mention anything that suggested organized ritual practice rather than individual folk magic?"

Peggy opened her clinical notebook to the Lydia section and read back through her notes with the concentration of someone seeing familiar text from a new angle. "She mentioned a

wooden box of items that appeared to be matching—not random objects but a set. A candle holder with a specific carved symbol she didn't recognize. A leather-bound book with no title on the cover. A list of names written in a hand she didn't know on paper she described as old. Very old."

A longer pause from Charlottesville.

"The book," Eze said. "Did she bring it with her? Or discard it?"

Peggy looked at her notes. "She donated most of the estate to a thrift shop. I don't know specifically what happened to the book."

"Find out," Eze said. Quietly, but with an emphasis that was not quiet at all. "And Peggy—be careful how you ask. If the book is what I think it may be, the people who own it do not donate their materials accidentally."

> *"For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open." — Luke 8:17 (NIV)*

## III.

She met with Lydia on Thursday.

Not at the center. Lydia had suggested, when Peggy called to arrange the meeting, that they meet at her home—a practical suggestion, since Lydia was no longer a clinical client in the formal sense and since the conversation Peggy needed to have sat outside the clinical frame. She arrived at the Crane house on a gray January afternoon to find David making coffee in the kitchen and Lydia at the dining room table with her hands folded in the particular way that meant she had already understood, from the tone of the phone call, that this was not an ordinary visit.

"The aunt's estate," Peggy said, after they had settled with their cups. "When you cleared it—what happened to the book? The leather-bound one with no title."

Something moved across Lydia's face. Not the old movement—not the occupant pressing toward the surface. Something more human and more complex: a recollection surfacing

through layers of deliberate non-remembering. The face of someone who had set a thing down carefully in a corner of their mind and was now being asked to go back to the corner.

"I didn't donate it," Lydia said. Her voice was steady, present, entirely her own—Peggy noted this with the habitual attention she brought to every conversation with a former client. "I meant to. I had it in the donation box for two days. But—" She stopped.

"But?"

"Someone came for it. The day before the thrift shop pickup. A woman I didn't know—I'd never seen her before. She knocked on my door and said she was a friend of my aunt's and she'd heard the estate was being cleared and she was wondering whether there were any books being given away. She was very specific about books."

Peggy set down her coffee cup with the careful deliberateness of someone ensuring their hands remain visibly still. "And you gave her the book."

"I gave her several books. I didn't think—" Lydia stopped again. "I didn't know, then, what I know now. I was still in the middle of everything. I was just trying to clear the house." She looked at Peggy directly. "Why? What is the book?"

"I don't know yet," Peggy said. "Can you describe the woman who came for it?"

Lydia described her: mid-sixties, slight, silver-haired, well-dressed in the manner of a small-town professional, with pale eyes that Lydia remembered as being the particular quality of pale that registers on the memory without immediately explaining why. She had been pleasant. Unremarkable except for those eyes and the specific nature of her request.

"She gave you her name?"

"She gave me a name," Lydia said, with the dry precision that was her most characteristic quality. "Margaret Voss. She said she lived in Hallow's Creek."

> *"And in those days shall the mighty and the kings who possess the earth implore Him to grant them a little respite from His angels of punishment to whom they were delivered, that they might fall down and worship before the Lord of Spirits." — 1 Enoch 63:1 (R.H. Charles translation)*

## IV.

The name Margaret Voss produced nothing in any public database Tamika could access within the law and within an afternoon. No registered voter in Hallow's Creek under that name. No property records. No professional license. No social media presence of any kind, which was in itself, in the current year, a form of information.

What Tamika did find, following a thread that Peggy would not have known to pull and that demonstrated again why Tamika's particular combination of administrative competence and tenacious curiosity was one of the great unremarked assets of the center, was a reference in the digitized archives of the Clarksburg Gazette to a Voss family property in the Hallow's Creek area, referenced in a 1987 article about rural land records. The property had been in the Voss family since the 1890s. The article mentioned, in passing, that the property included a structure locally known as the Hollow Gate—a stone arch at the edge of a forested ridge that old-timers in the area regarded with a vague unease that the article's author treated as quaint regional folklore.

Tamika brought this to Peggy's office at four o'clock on a Friday afternoon, set it on the desk, and looked at her with the expression of someone who has just laid down a card they did not expect to have.

"The Hollow Gate," Peggy said.

"Is a real place," Tamika said. "Or was, in 1987. And it gave its name to—"

"Something that is still operating." Peggy sat back. She thought about the letter from Pastor Croft. About three congregants mentioning the same name independently. About a woman with pale eyes who had come to collect a leather-bound book with no title the day before it would have been donated beyond her reach. She thought about Lydia's aunt and the cedar box and the list of names written in an unknown hand on very old paper.

She thought about what Eze had said: names like that are often given to something much older than the name.

She picked up her phone and called Pastor Elias Croft of Hallow's Creek.

## V.

He answered on the second ring with the voice of a man who has been waiting for the call.

They talked for ninety minutes. She told him what she had learned about the Voss property. He told her what he knew about the Order of the Hollow Gate, which was less than she expected and more than she was comfortable hearing.

It was old, he said. Older than Hallow's Creek itself, which had been settled in the 1820s by families from the Virginia Tidewater and the western Carolinas who brought with them, alongside their Baptist hymnals and their Presbyterian catechisms, the syncretic folk practices that the Scots-Irish and English poor had carried across the Atlantic from a pre-Christian Britain—a tangled inheritance of hedge magic and divination and the propitiation of spirits that had never been fully displaced by the Christianity that overlaid it. The Order, in its organized form, had emerged in the 1870s—he had found references to it in the church records of three defunct congregations in the area, where it was mentioned as a source of pastoral concern. It operated quietly, by invitation only, in a structure that was neither fully coven nor fully lodge but combined elements of both.

It dedicated its members. That was the word Croft used, and he used it with the theological precision of a man who understood what it meant: dedicated. Set apart. Committed, through formal ritual, to the service of specific spiritual entities whose names the Order's records did not make available to outsiders.

It recruited through family lines, primarily. But also through crisis—seeking out people in the community who were vulnerable, who were searching, who had been failed by their churches or their families or their own capacity to endure, and offering them something that presented itself as help.

"How many members?" Peggy asked.

A pause. "That I can document? Eleven. That I believe are active in the area, based on what my congregants have described? Closer to thirty. And Peggy—" His voice shifted. "Some of them are in positions of community influence. This is not a group that operates only on the margins. The woman you're describing—Margaret Voss—if that is who I think it is, she served on the Hallow's Creek town council for fourteen years."

Peggy was quiet for a moment.

"Are any of your affected congregants able to speak to me directly?"

"One," he said. "She's been trying to get out for two years. She came to me four months ago. I will ask her." He paused. "Bring Pastor Eze. Whatever you're planning to do with what you learn—bring him. And pray before you come. Pray hard and pray long. This thing in

Hallow's Creek has had one hundred and fifty years to root itself. You are not walking onto empty ground."

> *"So I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found no one." — Ezekiel 22:30 (NKJV)*

## VI.

She held the weekly team meeting that Friday evening at Calvary Bible and laid everything on the table.

The letter from Croft. The Voss name and the Hollow Gate property. The 1987 archive. The connection to Lydia's aunt's estate. The thread from Raymond Okafor's roots in Hallow's Creek to Carla Simmons's parents to the geographic corridor she was now seeing not as coincidence but as territory. She laid it all out with the same methodical precision she brought to every clinical presentation, and she watched the faces around the table move from attentiveness through comprehension and into the particular quality of focused gravity that she had come to associate with her team when they understood the full weight of what they were looking at.

Gerald was the first to speak. "This isn't a group of individuals with a shared practice. This is an organized entity with a deliberate strategy of community penetration. It recruits, it dedicates, it protects its members through social position, and it has been doing so for a hundred and fifty years." He paused. "That is not a pastoral problem. That is a territorial principality with institutional infrastructure."

"Yes," Eze said. He had arrived from Charlottesville within three hours of Peggy's call, which meant he had left as soon as she called, which meant he understood the gravity without being told. He sat with his notebook open and his hands folded on top of it and his eyes moving across the group with the steady attention of a general who is assessing not only the situation but the condition of the people he will take into it. "And this changes the nature of what we are doing. We have been responding to individuals—people who came to the center, people referred by pastors, people who sought help. What we are now looking at is the source from which those individuals came. The upstream."

"The root," Tamika said.

"The root," Eze confirmed. "And you do not deal with a root the same way you deal with the branches. The deliverance of individuals is necessary and real and will continue. But if the source of contamination in this region is an organized, dedicated, actively recruiting occult group with a century and a half of territorial claim—then the response to that requires more than a prayer canopy over a counseling center. It requires the Church to stand in the gap for the territory itself."

Marjorie, from her usual corner, said: "Stand in the gap. Like Ezekiel."

"Like Ezekiel," Eze said. "And I want to be direct with everyone in this room: what I am describing is more dangerous, more complex, and more costly than what we have done so far. What we have done so far was serious. What this requires is different in degree and different in kind. I will not ask anyone to go further than they have been specifically called to go. That calling must be sought in prayer, individually, before we take another step."

He looked around the table. He held each person's gaze for a moment—not assessing their courage, she understood, but their condition. Whether they were standing on the right ground.

"Take a week," he said. "Pray. Seek the Lord specifically about this. And come back and tell me what He said."

> *"And in those days the prayer of the righteous and the blood of the righteous shall have ascended from the earth before the Lord of Spirits." — 1 Enoch 47:1 (R.H. Charles translation)*

## VII.

During the week of prayer that followed, three things happened.

The first was that Carla Simmons came to her Thursday session and disclosed, for the first time, something she had been carrying since her intake eight weeks earlier. Her parents—the ones who had lived in the Hallow's Creek area until she was eight—had been members of something she described as a spiritual community. She had never had a name for it. She had memories of gatherings in a large stone building in the woods. Of fires. Of her parents leaving her with a neighbor for certain evenings and returning changed—quieter, different, with a quality of distraction that frightened her more than their ordinary selves had. She had been

eight when they moved away from the area and her parents had never spoken of it again and she had eventually placed the memories in the category of childhood strangeness that she suspected she had exaggerated or misremembered.

She had not exaggerated. She had not misremembered.

Peggy listened with the focused stillness she had developed over months of this work, noting everything, drawing no conclusions aloud, asking precise questions that opened the memory rather than directing it. When the session ended she sat for a long time after Carla had gone and she thought about the list of names in an unknown hand on very old paper that had been in the cedar box in the aunt's house and had traveled to Lydia's possession and then to Margaret Voss's careful hands.

She thought: some of those names are people who are still alive.

The second thing that happened during the week of prayer was that Raymond Okafor called the center and asked to see her urgently.

He arrived on Friday morning looking as he had in October—sleepless, precise, disturbed in a way that his teacher's training in precision made more rather than less apparent. He sat down and said, without preamble: "I found something in my wife's things."

His wife had died fourteen months ago. He had been slowly, painfully clearing her belongings over the course of the year—a process he had described in sessions as the most difficult thing he had done since her funeral, each object a conversation with someone who was no longer there to have it. He had reached, this week, a box of papers and personal documents at the back of her closet.

In the box was a membership certificate. Handwritten, on heavy paper, with a seal pressed into the lower right corner that he had photographed and sent to Peggy by text before he came in. It bore his wife's name. It bore a date—fifteen years before her death, seven years before their marriage. And it bore, in the ornate heading at the top of the page, a name that Raymond had not known until four months ago when it had appeared independently in three conversations in a pastor's congregation in Hallow's Creek:

## THE ORDER OF THE HOLLOW GATE

*Dedicated to the Keeping of the Ancient Threshold*

Raymond Okafor sat across from Peggy with the expression of a man who has discovered that the floor of a room he has been standing in for fifteen years is not what he thought it was made of.

"The voice," he said. His voice was controlled and careful and the control cost him something visible. "The voice that came at night and said my wife was trying to reach me. Was it—" He stopped. "Was it using her? Was it something she had been involved in that was using her image to get to me?"

The question was one of the hardest Peggy had been asked in twenty-two years of practice. Because the honest answer was that she did not know with certainty. And because the man across from her was grieving and had just discovered that the woman he had loved and lost had carried a secret from before their marriage that had implications she could not fully map, and because the truth, deployed without care, can wound as deeply as the lie.

She answered carefully and truthfully and with the full weight of her love for this particular human being in this particular moment:

"Raymond, I do not know with certainty what the voice was or what it used. What I can tell you is that it did not bring you truth. Your wife—whatever she was involved in before she knew you—loved you. Her love for you was real. I have seen the grief you carry for her and I know it is not the grief of a man who was deceived in his marriage. Whatever she opened before you met her, she was not that opening to you. She was your wife. Hold onto that."

He was quiet for a long time.

"What do I do with the certificate?" he asked.

"Bring it to me," Peggy said. "And then we are going to pray over it together. And then we are going to burn it."

## VIII.

The third thing that happened during the week of prayer happened to Peggy.

It happened on Wednesday night, and it was the most significant of the three, and she did not tell anyone about it immediately—not because she was hiding it but because she needed twenty-four hours to be certain that what she had experienced was what she believed it to be and not the product of an overwrought imagination in a woman who had spent four months in proximity to the extraordinary.

She had been praying in her study at home, as she had been doing each evening that week, specifically and at length about the question Eze had asked the team to seek: Lord, are you calling me further into this? Specifically into the territory of Hallow's Creek and the Order and whatever stands at the center of this geography of harm that has been revealing itself across her caseload for the past two months?

She had been praying for an hour when the quality of the room changed.

Not in the way the rooms in the sessions had changed—not the drop in temperature, not the sub-audible vibration, not the hostile atmospheric pressure of an entity's presence. The opposite. A warmth. A weight—not oppressive, not frightening, but immense. The kind of weight that a person of her theological formation recognized, with the bone-deep recognition of something encountered before in smaller doses across thirty-seven years of faith, as the weight of the presence of God. Not a feeling. A fact. The room had become inhabited by something she could not see and had no need to see and in whose presence she found herself, without decision or deliberation, face-down on the carpet of her own study.

She had not planned to be on the floor. She was on the floor.

She lay there for a period of time she could not afterward measure and she heard—not audibly, not in the way sound travels through air, but in the way that is older and more certain than auditory perception—three words.

***Stand in the gap.***

She did not move for a long time after. When she finally sat up, the room was ordinary again—her study, her books, her desk with the lamp, Ezra alert on the ottoman with the expression of a cat who has just observed something it categorically refuses to explain. She sat on the floor with her back against the chair and her Bible in her lap and she breathed.

She thought about Ezekiel. I sought for a man among them who would make a wall, and stand in the gap before Me on behalf of the land.

She thought about what standing in the gap meant. Not standing in the gap on behalf of two women who walked into a counseling center. On behalf of the land. The territory itself. The geography of Clarksburg and Hallow's Creek and the fourteen-mile corridor between them where something had been operating since the 1870s and perhaps long before that, opening doors and recruiting vessels and establishing claims and building the kind of long, patient,

organized darkness that did not announce itself and did not require announcement because it had learned, in a century and a half of practice, to look like everything except what it was.

She wrote one line in her journal that night:

> *He said: stand in the gap. I said: yes. I don't know yet what that means in practical terms. I know what it means in every term that matters. Lord — show me the ground I am standing on, and show me where the gap is, and put me in it. I am Yours. I have always been Yours. Use me.*

The following Friday, the team reconvened at Calvary Bible.

Eze asked who had heard from God during the week. Every person at the table—Gerald, Tamika, Marjorie, and Peggy—said yes. He asked what they had heard. Each answer was different in its particularity. Each answer pointed in the same direction.

"Then we are agreed," Eze said. He looked at each face around the table with the settled composure of a man who has stood at this kind of beginning before and knows what it is. "We go to Hallow's Creek. We meet with Pastor Croft and his congregant. We look at the territory. We pray over it. And then—" He paused. "And then we do what the Lord of the territory says to do next. Not what we plan. Not what we strategize. What He says."

He closed his notebook.

"The ancient doorway has been open for a hundred and fifty years," he said. "God did not send us here to admire it. He sent us here to close it."

> *"The LORD your God is He who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you." — Deuteronomy 20:4 (NKJV)*

Afterward, walking to her car in the cold January dark, Peggy paused in the parking lot and looked up at the winter sky above Clarksburg—clear, dense with stars, the kind of sky that appears only when the air is cold enough to be honest about how much light the universe contains.

She thought about a doorway that had been open since the 1870s. She thought about Lydia's grandmother and Nora's mother and Raymond's wife and Carla's parents and a woman

with pale eyes who collected books with specific intention and a stone arch in the forested hills fourteen miles east of where she was standing. She thought about one hundred and fifty years of organized darkness and the communities it had shaped from the inside, quietly, patiently, through the steady accumulation of dedicated lives and opened doors and the particular cruelty of the thing that looks like help.

She thought about the three words spoken into the carpet of her study.

She thought: I was not a warrior in September. I am one now. Not because I chose it—because the work chose me, and choosing me chose all the things that are in me, including the twenty-two years and the clinical training and the prayer life and the love and the specific, costly, particular willingness to enter the dark room on behalf of the person who cannot get out alone.

She thought: He has been preparing this since before I was born.

She got in her car.

She drove home through the Clarksburg night, and the stars were out, and the ancient doorway in the hills to the east was still open, and she was going to close it.

❖ ❖ ❖

*End of Chapter Eleven*

## CHAPTER TWELVE

# *The Devil's Counterattack*

> *"Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you." — Deuteronomy 31:6 (NIV)*

> *"And Mastema came forth and said before God: 'Lord, Creator, let some of them remain before me, and let them hearken to my voice, and do all that I shall say unto them; for if some of them*

*are not left to me, I shall not be able to execute the power of my will on the sons of men.'" — Book of Jubilees 10:8*

## I.

The first nightmare came on a Tuesday.

Peggy had learned, in the months since September, to treat her dreams with the discernment she brought to everything else in this work: neither dismissing them as meaningless nor elevating them into the category of direct divine communication without examination. She had read the accounts in Daniel and in the Psalms, she had read the Desert Fathers on the discernment of interior phenomena, she had listened to Eze describe, with the precise clinical detachment of long experience, the ways in which the spiritual realm uses the dreaming mind as a point of access when waking defenses are more firmly maintained.

She had understood all of this in the abstract.

The nightmare was not abstract.

She recorded it in her journal the morning after, while the details were still sharp, because she had learned that precise recording was both therapeutic discipline and strategic intelligence:

*I was in the counseling room at New Hope but it was wrong in the way of dreams — the geometry distorted, the window on the wrong wall, the light coming from a direction that had no source. There was a client in the chair across from me. At first she had no face — not hidden, simply absent, as though the face had been removed and the space where it had been was now as smooth and blank as the back of a hand. Then the face resolved. It was Lydia. But Lydia as she was in October, before the deliverance — the occupant close to the surface, the eyes wrong. She looked at me and she said, in the voice that was not her voice: 'You should not have opened this. You do not understand what you have disturbed. The gate has been sealed for a reason. Walk away from Hallow's Creek, Peggy Walters. Walk away and we will let you keep what you have.' I said: what have I got? And she said: 'Your peace. Your life as it was. Your ordinary, quiet, safe little life.' And I felt it — the pull of it. The genuine temptation of the ordinary. The unbearable attractiveness of a world without confrontation. I stood up in the dream to leave. I was going to walk away. And then — I don't know if it was a sound or a light or simply the knowledge of a Presence that had been there the whole time and that I had not noticed until that moment — something stopped me.*

> *And I turned back. And the thing wearing Lydia's face was afraid. I could see it. Whatever it was, it was afraid of what had just entered the room.*

She set down her pen and read what she had written.

She thought: it offered me the ordinary.

She thought: it knew that was the right offer.

She thought about the nights before October, before Nora's barefoot arrival, before the voice that knew her name in Lydia's session. She thought about the clean, quiet, manageable life she had been living—the good work she had been doing, the stable practice, the respected professional standing, the morning prayer and the Thursday lunch with colleagues and the cat on the chair and the decent salary and the complete absence of anything in her life that was frightening.

It had been a good life. It had been safe.

She thought: safe was never the point. I just didn't know that until this year.

> *"For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it." — Matthew 16:25 (NKJV)*

## II.

The nightmares did not remain in the realm of the symbolic.

They became, across the following two weeks, increasingly specific and increasingly targeted. Not every night—the pattern was irregular enough to prevent the kind of steeling that comes from knowing when the next assault is scheduled—but frequently enough that Peggy began to dread the crossing from wakefulness to sleep with the particular dread of someone approaching a territory they cannot control.

The second dream replayed, with cruel precision, the session in which she had not escalated the client she called Daniel. It showed her not the clinical facts of the case—which she had already worked through in her own inventory, which she had repented of and released and covered with the blood of Christ—but a version of the session twisted by a degree of malice that no honest memory could replicate. In the dream Daniel looked at her across the counseling

table and said: “You knew. You chose to protect yourself.” And she could not answer because the dream had stripped her of the ability to speak.

She woke at 2:08 in the morning and sat in the dark for an hour before she could pray. Then she prayed until five. She went to work looking like someone who had been through a long night, which she had.

The third dream was subtler and more dangerous. It did not deploy the past or the frightening. It offered her a future—a clear, detailed, genuinely beautiful vision of a life in which she had written the paper and delivered the conference and been recognized as a pioneer in the integration of clinical and spiritual care, and the recognition had come with a speaking career and a book deal and invitations to platforms she had never sought but that her wounded professional pride found, in the particular vulnerability of the dreaming state, more attractive than she wanted to admit. The dream did not feel evil. It felt like success. It felt like vindication for everything the autumn had cost her.

She woke from that dream more troubled than from any nightmare.

She called Eze at seven in the morning without apologizing for the hour.

“The pride dream,” he said, when she described it. “I have been waiting for it.”

“You expected this?”

“I expected something like it. The straightforward assault—the fear, the accusation, the replayed wound—those are first-order weapons. They are powerful but they are also recognizable. When a serious practitioner learns to identify and refuse them, the adversary escalates to second-order weapons. The ones that are harder to identify because they are not obviously evil. They are distortions of good things. Your legitimate desire for your work to be recognized. Your justified wish that the cost of this autumn not be invisible. Your real hope that what you have learned can help others.” He paused. “The distortion takes something God-given and bends it by a degree or two. Enough to redirect you from service to prominence. From the tool to the hand holding it.”

“And the test is—”

“Whether you can hold the God-given desire without grasping it. Whether you can offer it back to Him and say: if the recognition comes, it comes. If it does not, the work was still worth doing. The dream is testing whether you have fully surrendered the outcome or whether there is a corner of you that requires the world to see what you have done.”

> *"For all that is in the world — the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life — is not of the Father but is of the world." — 1 John 2:16 (NKJV)*

She held the phone in silence for a moment.

"There is," she said. Honestly and without self-defense. "There is a corner of me that requires it."

"Good," Eze said. Not sarcastically. With the specific warmth of a man who respects honesty more than performance. "Now you know it is there. Now you can deal with it. Bring it to God. Not as a confession of shameful weakness—as an offering. Here is this desire, Lord. I give it to You. Do with it what serves Your purposes and let what does not serve them go."

She prayed that prayer on her knees in her bedroom before she went to work, in the specific, undecorated language Eze had given her. She felt, in the praying of it, the particular release of something set down that she had not fully known she was carrying.

She was learning, this winter, the specific geography of her own soul in ways that twenty-two years of professional practice and thirty-seven years of faith had not required her to learn. She was learning where the cracks were. The Enemy was providing the map. She was grateful, in the specific way that one is grateful for painful information: not happily, but fully.

## III.

The strange occurrences at the center began in the second week of January.

They were small, individually. A door that Tamika had locked was found open in the morning—not forced, not broken, simply unlocked, as though someone had a key. The center's internet connection failed three times in five days at moments that disrupted specific clinical sessions—twice during appointments with clients Peggy was beginning to identify as connected to the Order, once during a video call with Eze in which they were discussing the Hallow's Creek territory. The disruptions were each attributable, with modest effort, to ordinary technical explanation. The pattern of their timing was not attributable to ordinary anything.

A smell appeared in the session room on a Wednesday morning—not a strong smell, not identifiable as anything specific, but a quality of mustiness that had no source and that Tamika

described, when she noticed it, as “like a room that has been closed for a long time.” It was gone by Thursday. Marjorie, whom Peggy called, said flatly: “Anoint the room. Today.” Peggy did.

On a Friday afternoon, a woman appeared at the front door of the center who asked for Peggy by name and who would not give her own. Tamika, who had developed over the autumn the specific situational awareness of someone who has stood in doorways and prayed while extraordinary things happened on the other side, described her afterward: sixty or so, silver-haired, well-dressed, pale eyes.

When Tamika went to get Peggy, the woman was gone.

Tamika found, on the porch where the woman had stood, a single playing card: the Ace of Spades, face down. Not a threat, not a message with any legible content. A marker. The kind left to let you know that something has noted your address.

Peggy picked it up with a paper towel, put it in an envelope, and called Gerald. She did not tell Tamika what it likely was. Tamika, who had grown up in a Pentecostal household in rural Georgia and whose grandmother had cast out a spirit at the kitchen table, needed no explanation. She had already anointed the porch.

> *“No weapon formed against you shall prosper, and every tongue which rises against you in judgment you shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD.” — Isaiah 54:17 (NKJV)*

## IV.

The personal temptation arrived in the form of Dr. Nathan Hale.

She had known Nathan for eleven years—they had been colleagues at the same regional counseling conference circuit, occupied adjacent professional territories without ever overlapping significantly, maintained the friendly-collegial relationship of people who respect each other from a pleasant distance. He was a psychologist in private practice in Roanoke, fifty-eight years old, recently divorced, genuinely intelligent, and possessed of the specific attractiveness of a man who has been through something difficult and come out of it without bitterness. He had called her in December to ask whether she would present a session at a conference he was organizing. She had declined because of the February conference. He had

been gracious. He had called again in January, ostensibly to ask a follow-up question about a client he wanted to refer.

The follow-up call lasted forty-five minutes.

She enjoyed it more than she had expected to. He was funny and direct and intellectually stimulating in a way that her current professional circles, for all their spiritual depth, did not always provide. He asked good questions about her work. He listened with genuine interest. He said, at the end of the call, that he'd like to have dinner next time she was in Roanoke and that he was asking in the capacity of a man who would like to have dinner with her and not solely as a professional contact.

She said she would think about it.

She thought about it.

In the thinking she discovered something that she examined with the same clinical honesty she brought to the dreams: she was lonely. Not in a way she had been consciously aware of, because she was a woman with a full life and deep relationships and work that absorbed her completely. But in the specific way that a woman who has spent the autumn in extraordinary company—the team, the prayer meetings, the deliverance sessions, the presence of God on the carpet of her study—discovers that ordinary social life has receded to a distance it did not previously occupy. The people who had been sufficient company in August were still good people. They could not speak to what she had experienced since September. Nathan Hale was an intelligent, kind, interested man who was unconnected to any of this and who found her interesting and said so.

The pull of it was real.

And it was also, she understood when she prayed about it with the specific attention of a woman who had been trained by the last four months to follow the destination of her thoughts rather than only their origin, something she needed to examine carefully. Not because Nathan Hale was evil—she had no reason to believe anything of the sort. But because the timing was precise. Because in the middle of the most significant spiritual engagement of her life, a pleasant distraction had arrived to occupy the bandwidth of her heart. And because she was, as Eze had told her in October, a person worth attacking through every available avenue.

She was not going to have dinner with Nathan Hale. Not now. Not while she was being called into something that required her whole self. She would revisit the question when the season permitted.

She called him back and said this, as directly and as kindly as she could. He was gracious again. She hung up and sat with the loneliness honestly, without trying to fix it, and she said to God: I know You see this. I am trusting You with it.

The loneliness did not leave. But it sat differently after the prayer—carried rather than concealed, offered rather than suppressed. She was learning, this winter, the difference.

> *"Delight yourself also in the LORD, and He shall give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass." — Psalm 37:4–5 (NKJV)*

## V.

The most direct assault came on a Thursday morning, and it came not in the night or through a telephone call but in her own body.

She was driving to the center at eight-fifteen on a clear January morning, the roads dry and the sky the hard blue of winter, when she felt it: a sudden, total, physical onset of fear that had no object. Not anxiety in the clinical sense—she knew anxiety, she had treated it for twenty-two years, she recognized its particular texture. This was different. It was the physiological experience of terror without a cause: elevated heart rate that arrived from zero to acute in the space of a breath, a cold that was internal rather than atmospheric, a certainty that was installed rather than reasoned—the absolute conviction, arriving fully formed from nowhere she could identify, that she was going to die.

Not soon. Now. In this car, on this road, in this ordinary January morning.

She pulled over. She sat on the shoulder of Cedar Mill Road with her hazards blinking and her hands on the wheel and she breathed with the focused deliberateness of a woman who has learned to breathe under pressure. Her heart rate was, objectively, alarming. She knew what she was experiencing in medical terms: adrenergic surge, sympathetic nervous system activation, the full physiological expression of the fight-or-flight response triggered in the absence of any fight or any flight.

She also knew, with equal clarity, what she was experiencing in spiritual terms.

She waited until she had enough breath to speak. Then she said, into the interior of the car, with the windows up and the hazards blinking and Cedar Mill Road empty in both directions:

"I know what this is. You are not the author of my death and you are not the master of my fear. 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?"

> *"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 came against me to eat up my flesh, my enemies and foes, they stumbled and fell." — Psalm 27:1–2 (NKJV)*

She spoke the verse aloud three times. Not as an incantation. As a declaration of the specific truth that stood in direct opposition to the specific lie that had been installed in her body without her consent.

The fear did not vanish immediately. It withdrew the way it had arrived—gradually, over the course of several minutes, the heart rate descending, the cold receding, the installed certainty of death losing its conviction in the face of the spoken truth. By the time she pulled back onto Cedar Mill Road she was shaking slightly but she was no longer afraid, which was not the same as the fear being gone—it was something better, the experience of fear that has been faced and refused.

She arrived at the center twelve minutes late.

Tamika took one look at her and said: "Sit down. I'll get the oil and the coffee. In that order."

Peggy sat down.

## VI.

She described the full catalogue of the January assaults to Eze that Friday evening, reading from the notes she had kept with the methodical precision that was her primary professional habit and that had become, she had come to understand, a form of spiritual

discipline as well: naming what had occurred clearly and without embellishment was a refusal to allow the assaults to grow in the retelling beyond their actual dimensions.

Eze listened through all of it without speaking. When she finished, he was quiet for a moment.

"How are you standing?" he asked. Not metaphorically.

"I am standing," she said. "More firmly than I expected to be, given the week. Less firmly than I'd like."

"That is the honest answer and the correct answer," he said. "I want to tell you what I am observing from the outside, because you are inside it and perspective is one of the first casualties of sustained assault." He paused. "You named the dream for what it was. You identified the distortion in the pride dream and brought it to God before it had time to establish itself. You declined the relational distraction without condemning yourself for being susceptible to it. You pulled over on Cedar Mill Road and spoke truth into the fear rather than allowing the fear to speak for you. These are not the responses of a person who is losing ground. These are the responses of a person who has been trained and is using the training."

She thought about that for a moment.

"It doesn't feel like training when you're in it," she said.

"No," he said. "It never does. Training felt like training in the gymnasium. In the field, it feels like survival. But they are the same thing." He paused. "And Peggy—I need you to hear something clearly, because I think you may be dismissing it as a function of the week's difficulty rather than hearing it as what it is."

"Say it."

"The intensity of the counterattack is proportional to the threat you represent. A counselor who sits with depressed clients in a comfortable office does not receive what you have received this month. The Enemy does not deploy this kind of coordinated, multi-vector pressure against people it considers inconsequential. What you are experiencing is, in a specific and real sense, a form of confirmation. You are being treated as a serious threat because you are one."

> *"And it came to pass, when all our enemies heard thereof, and all the heathen that were about us saw these things, they were much*

> *cast down in their own eyes: for they perceived that this work was wrought of our God." — Nehemiah 6:16 (KJV)*

She sat with this for a long time after the call ended.

She thought about Nehemiah, rebuilding the wall while the enemies mocked and threatened and conspired. Building with one hand and holding a weapon with the other. Not pausing the work because of the opposition—understanding the opposition as evidence that the work was worth doing.

She thought: I am Nehemiah on Cedar Mill Road with my hazards blinking.

The thought made her laugh, alone in her office in the January evening. It was the first genuine laugh she had produced in two weeks, and it felt, in its way, like a form of prayer—the specific prayer of a person who has retained, under sustained pressure, the ability to find the absurdity in their own situation without losing the gravity of it.

She wrote it in her journal.

## VII.

The team gathering on the last Friday of January was the most spiritually charged meeting they had held since the night in the lower hall.

Peggy had shared, by email, a summary of January's assaults—not every detail, but enough that no one arrived uninformed. The room at Calvary Bible had been prayed over by Dottie's intercessors for two hours before the meeting. Gerald opened with Scripture and prayer that lasted twenty minutes and that transformed the energy of the room in the specific way that serious prayer transforms rooms: not through emotional stimulation but through the arrival of a quality of clarity and weight that was, by now, unmistakable to everyone present.

Eze addressed the group directly about what the counterattack meant strategically.

"What we are seeing is a response to a credible threat," he said. "The Order of the Hollow Gate has been operating in this territory for a century and a half without significant organized opposition from the Church. What has happened since September at New Hope Counseling Center is, from their perspective, the most significant challenge to their operations in living memory. They are responding the way any organized entity responds to a credible threat: by

targeting the leadership, by attempting to discredit the work, by deploying fear and distraction and temptation. None of this is unexpected. All of it is manageable."

He looked at Peggy.

"The question before us is not whether we can withstand the assault. We can. We have demonstrated that. The question is whether we are prepared to move from defensive to offensive. Withstanding the counterattack is necessary. But it is not the calling. The calling is to go to Hallow's Creek, to meet with Pastor Croft and his congregant, to pray over the territory, and to do whatever the Lord of that territory shows us to do. The defensive work keeps us standing. The offensive work closes the gate."

He opened his notebook.

"I would like to propose that we go to Hallow's Creek on the second Saturday of February. Two weeks before the conference. I want everyone in this room to have seven days of focused preparation—prayer, fasting if the Lord directs it, a specific review of the spiritual armor passage that I would like us to read together tonight. And I want no one to go who has not cleared the going with God in the specific way that I described after the last meeting. Confirmation. Not assumption. Not courage alone. Confirmed calling."

He looked around the table.

"Are we in agreement?"

Around the table: yes. The same word, the same direction, the same weight. Gerald's yes was pastoral and settled. Tamika's was direct and undecorated. Marjorie's carried the particular authority of a woman who has spent forty years walking into rooms where difficult things were happening. And Peggy's—

Peggy's yes was fifty-four years of becoming exactly the person this moment required.

> *"Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age." — Ephesians 6:10–12 (NKJV)*

## VIII.

She drove home from Calvary Bible through the January dark with the heater on and her mind very quiet—the specific quiet that follows a significant decision, not the quiet of uncertainty resolved but the quiet of a direction fully accepted.

She thought about the dream. The voice in the dream—wearing Lydia's face, speaking with Lydia's lips—had offered her the ordinary life. Your peace. Your quiet, safe little life. And it had known, with the targeting precision that was the Enemy's most unsettling attribute, that the offer would be genuinely tempting. That there was a part of her that wanted it.

She thought: that part is not wrong for wanting it. The desire for peace is not a sin. The desire to not be frightened, to not be assaulted in her sleep and on empty roads and through the professional apparatus of her career—these were not spiritually deficient desires. They were human. Profoundly, legitimately human. Jesus Himself, in Gethsemane, had asked whether the cup could be removed.

The question was not whether the desire was real. The question was what you did with it when it came up against the calling.

> *"He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, 'O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.'" — Matthew 26:39 (NKJV)*

Not as I will, but as You will.

She had preached this passage in her mind ten thousand times. She had counseled clients through their own Gethsemane moments—the places where what they wanted and what God was asking diverged and the divergence had to be navigated with the specific, costly honesty of someone who cannot pretend the cup is not bitter.

She was in her own Gethsemane.

She pulled into her driveway and sat for a moment in the dark car. She could see the kitchen light through the window—she had left it on, as she always did when she knew she'd be driving home in the dark, a small domestic mercy she had practiced for years. The light was warm and the house was hers and inside was the chair where Ezra slept and the kitchen table

where she had written thirty-seven years of prayers and the bed where she would sleep tonight without knowing, for certain, what the next two weeks would bring.

She thought: I am afraid.

She thought: I am going anyway.

She got out of the car.

She walked to the door.

She went inside.

> *January 31st. The dreams, the strange occurrences, the fear on Cedar Mill Road, the loneliness, the offer of the ordinary — I am documenting all of it not because I require a record of my suffering but because I require a record of my standing. On every morning of this month I have stood. Not without cost. Not without fear. Not without the specific, grinding awareness of what sustained assault does to a person's endurance over time. But I have stood. And He has been sufficient — not comfortable, not painless, but sufficient, which is all He promised and more than enough. We go to Hallow's Creek in two weeks. I do not know what we will find there. I know who goes with us. I know the authority we carry. And I know — with a certainty that this month of assault has tested and confirmed rather than diminished — that the ancient doorway in those hills has been open long enough. Long enough. It is time to close it.*

She closed the journal.

She fed Ezra.

She went to bed.

The night was quiet. The dreams did not come.

At 3:17 in the morning she woke once, briefly, and lay in the dark and felt the silence of the house around her—not the silence of absence but the silence of kept ground. Sacred, ordinary, held.

She thought: He is here.

She slept.

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*End of Chapter Twelve*

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# *Secrets of the Past*

> *"Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." — Psalm 139:23–24 (NKJV)*

> *"And all the secrets of the depths of the earth shall be revealed, and those who have been destroyed by the desert shall rejoice, and those who have been devoured by the wild beasts, and those who have been devoured by the fish of the sea: for they shall return and find hope in the day of the Elect One." — 1 Enoch 51:1 (R.H. Charles translation)*

### I.

The first Saturday of February came in pale and still, the sky the color of old linen, the air holding that particular breathless quality of a winter morning that cannot decide whether it intends to snow. Peggy was in her study at six in the morning with her Bible and her third cup of coffee and Ezra on the radiator and the week of preparation behind her like a finished road.

It had been, by the measure of the weeks preceding it, a quiet week. The nightmares had not returned with the intensity of January. The strange occurrences at the center had subsided—not entirely, but to the level of background noise rather than deliberate assault, which Eze had told her to expect: when the adversary has failed to dislodge a person through escalated pressure, the pattern is often to withdraw to a lower sustained level while regrouping for the next significant engagement. She was not deceived by the quiet. She was grateful for it,

in the way a soldier is grateful for the lull between actions: as time for restoration, not as evidence that the war has ended.

She had spent the week as Eze had directed: in prayer, in fasting on Tuesday and Thursday, in a deliberate and thorough review of the armor passage that she had now memorized so completely that it ran beneath her waking thoughts like a second conversation. She had also done something she had not planned and that had arrived not as a decision but as an instruction she could not ignore: she had gone back to the inventory she had done in October.

Not to add to it. To deepen it.

There were things she had named in October and released and believed she had adequately dealt with. She had been wrong about some of them. Not wrong about the naming or the releasing—those had been genuine and real. Wrong about the adequacy. Some things, she was discovering, require more than one visit to the altar. Some things have roots that go deeper than the first excavation reaches, and the first visit clears the surface but leaves the root system intact, and it is the root system that the adversary uses as its foothold.

She had been learning this about herself all week.

She had been learning it the way she had learned everything significant in her life: at considerable cost, with complete honesty, in the presence of God.

> *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." — 1 John 1:9 (NKJV)*

## II.

It had begun on Monday evening with a passage she had not been looking for.

She was reading in the Psalms—the penitential psalms, which she had turned to in the week of preparation because they seemed the right terrain for what she was about to walk into—when she reached the thirty-second psalm and read the third verse with an attention she had not previously brought to it:

> *"When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all the day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was turned into the drought of summer." — Psalm 32:3–4 (NKJV)*

She sat with the verse for a long time.

When I kept silent.

She thought about the things she had named in October—the divorce, the pastor, Daniel. She had named them. She had repented of her part in each, renounced whatever doors her responses to them had opened, prayed the closing prayer in Eze's formula. She had done this carefully and genuinely. But she had noticed, in the doing of it, a quality in her approach to two of the three that she had not fully examined: a speed. A briskness. A willingness to move through the naming and the prayer with the efficiency of a competent woman doing a necessary task.

She had not kept silent about them in the sense of refusing to acknowledge them. She had named them.

But she had not, she was realizing with the slow, precise discomfort of a person recognizing something about themselves they would have preferred not to recognize, she had not actually felt them. Not fully. She had processed them. She had prayed about them. She had applied the appropriate spiritual and psychological interventions with the skill of a trained practitioner and the discipline of a mature Christian and the speed of a woman who is very good at moving through difficult things without stopping in them.

The bones, Psalm 32 suggested, know the difference.

## III.

The one she had moved through most quickly was the divorce.

His name was Thomas. Thomas Walters, whose surname she had kept not out of sentiment but because she had been Dr. Walters in her professional life for four years before the marriage ended and the name had become hers in a way that preceded him. They had been married for nine years, divorced for seventeen. She had not spoken his name in her private prayer in years—she had prayed about the divorce in October in the language of the event rather than the person, which she was now understanding as a form of careful distance maintained not for health but for self-protection.

She thought about Thomas on Monday evening and she felt, with a clarity that had not been available in October, what she had not let herself feel then: grief. Not the processed, intellectually integrated grief of a woman who has done her therapeutic work. The original grief. The specific, bodily, particular grief of a young woman who had believed in the marriage with her whole self and had watched it fail and had not, in the years since, allowed herself to feel the depth of the failure without immediately moving to the lesson it had taught her.

She was fifty-four years old and she sat in her study on a Monday evening in February and she wept for the first time—genuinely, not clinically, not as an exercise in emotional processing—for the marriage that had not survived.

She wept for the thirty-six-year-old woman she had been. She wept for what that woman had wanted and for what she had lost and for the seventeen years during which she had managed the loss so competently that the management had become indistinguishable from healing.

It was not healing.

She let herself know that. All the way down.

> *I remember the morning I understood it was over. Not when he said the words — those came later, in the language of lawyers and logistics. The morning when I understood it was a Tuesday in March, seventeen years ago, and I was standing at the kitchen window watching the neighbor's dog cross the yard and I felt something leave me. Not leave the marriage — leave me. The specific hope that had been living in me since the wedding day, the hope that what was broken could be mended, that love was sufficient to the work required. I felt it go. And I did not tell anyone. I did not weep. I made coffee. I went to the office. I saw clients all day. I helped four people with their pain. And I put mine in a room and locked the door and called it healing and I have called it that for seventeen years.*

She wrote this in her journal on Monday night and read it back and thought: that room has been the adversary's address in me. The locked room where the ungrieved grief lived. The place that was not closed and covered but merely concealed, and concealment and closure are not the same thing, and the Enemy, who is not omniscient but is very old and very patient and very good at finding what is hidden, had known the difference.

She prayed over it for two hours. Not the efficient, formula-shaped prayer of October. The slow, halting, deeply personal prayer of a woman who is, for the first time, letting God into a room she has managed alone for seventeen years.

She said: I am sorry. Not to Thomas—she would write to Thomas separately, a letter she had been composing in some part of her mind since October without knowing it. To God. I am sorry for the speed. For the efficiency. For confusing competence with surrender. For managing this when You wanted to heal it. For giving You the words of the prayer without giving You the room.

She felt, in the praying, something shift. Not dramatically—not the warmth of the night in the study when He had spoken three words into her. A quieter movement. The specific quality of a door, long sealed by layers of careful paint, being opened from the outside.

She was, she understood then, being prepared. Not just for Hallow's Creek. For a level of this work that required a vessel without the locked rooms. And the preparation was happening now, in the week before the going, because the Preparer knew what she did not yet fully know: what she was about to face would require access to parts of herself that she had, for seventeen years, kept under managed lock.

> *"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." — Psalm 147:3 (NKJV)*

## IV.

The pastor came on Wednesday.

She had referred to him in her October inventory as simply the pastor—a deliberate anonymization that she had told herself was about propriety and had been, she was now understanding, about distance. She had not written his name then. She wrote it now:

Pastor David Mercer.

He had been the senior pastor of the church where she had spent eight years in her early thirties, the years just after her clinical training and just before the divorce. He was a gifted preacher and a dynamic leader and a man who had recognized, early in her tenure at the church, that Peggy Walters was exceptional, and who had used that recognition first as affirmation and then as currency.

He had not assaulted her physically. She wanted to be precise about this because precision mattered, because her professional training had trained her to be precise about categories, and because the harm David Mercer had done was real without requiring the most dramatic category to contain it. What he had done was this: he had cultivated her trust and then violated it, specifically and deliberately, in the service of his own need for admiration. He had shared her confidences with others. He had taken credit for work she had done. He had, in the private language of their pastoral relationship, established an emotional intimacy that was not sexual but was not appropriate—a closeness that served his ego at the expense of her genuine spiritual formation.

And when she had finally, at thirty-five, understood what was happening and addressed it directly, he had managed her the way powerful men manage women who have become inconvenient: with a combination of charm and dismissal and the institutional weight of his position, until she had left the church feeling not vindicated but diminished. As though the problem had been her perception rather than his behavior.

She had spent nineteen years believing, in the part of herself where the locked rooms lived, that she had been wrong to trust him. That the failure of the relationship had been a failure of her own discernment. That she had been naive and credulous and had elevated a flawed man to a position of spiritual authority he had not earned.

All of this was true. None of it was the full truth.

The full truth, which she sat with on a Wednesday evening in the thin light of a February dusk, was that David Mercer had sinned against her and she had never, in nineteen years, allowed herself to call it by that name without immediately softening it with her own partial culpability. She had been so committed to her professional understanding of the complexity of human behavior—so determined not to be the victim who could not see the full picture—that she had extended to David Mercer a generosity of interpretation that she had denied herself.

> *“For we have not a high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” — Hebrews 4:15–16 (KJV)*

She wrote his name again in her journal, deliberately, because she had avoided writing it for nineteen years and avoidance was the architecture of the locked room.

She wrote: David Mercer sinned against me. I was not wrong to trust him. Trust is not naivety—it is the reasonable extension of good faith to someone who holds a position of responsibility. He violated that trust. That is his sin, not mine. My sin was smaller and different: the sin of managing my own wound rather than bringing it to God, of protecting my professional self-image as someone who sees clearly by denying that I had been genuinely harmed by someone I had genuinely trusted.

She sat with what she had written.

She thought: I have been counseling people through this exact pattern for twenty-two years. The person who was genuinely wronged and who cannot receive their own grievance because the receiving of it would require them to be something other than the person in control of their own narrative. I have seen it a hundred times. I have helped a hundred people through it. I did not know I was in it.

She thought about the quality of pastoral leadership she had maintained since David Mercer—the careful, bounded, rigorously professional spiritual relationships that had characterized her engagement with pastoral authority for nineteen years. She thought about the way she had always deferred to Gerald and Eze in matters of spiritual authority while maintaining, underneath the deference, a vigilance that was not healthy trust but its clinical cousin: managed cooperation from a guarded distance.

She thought: I have never fully trusted a spiritual authority since David Mercer. I have worked with them. I have respected them. I have deployed their counsel with appropriate professional discernment. I have not trusted them with myself.

And she thought: that guarded distance has been a gap in my own armor. A place where the adversary has had more room to operate than I knew.

She prayed for David Mercer—genuinely, which was harder than naming him and harder than calling his behavior sin and harder than anything she had done in this week's preparation. She prayed with the specific effort of someone who is doing something against every instinct of her wounded self, in obedience to a Lord whose instructions about forgiveness she had taught and preached and counseled and had not, until this Wednesday evening, fully applied to this specific instance.

She prayed: Lord, I release David Mercer. I release him from my judgment and my vigilance and the nineteen years of managed distance I have maintained in his wake. I forgive

him. Not because what he did was acceptable—it was not. Because You require forgiveness and You have given me the grace to offer it and refusing it has cost me more than offering it will. Take this. It is too heavy to carry and I am done carrying it.

The room was quiet after the prayer. Outside the window the February evening had gone fully dark and a few flakes of snow had begun to fall, soft and deliberate, as though the weather were participating in a ceremony of its own.

## V.

Daniel came on Thursday.

She had thought, in October, that she had dealt with Daniel. She had named him. She had prayed over the session she had not escalated. She had released what she could release. She had done this, she had believed, adequately.

The Thursday of preparation week showed her what adequately had missed.

Daniel Price had been twenty-eight years old and a graduate student in philosophy at the university, referred to Peggy by his department advisor who had become concerned about his declining attendance and increasing withdrawal. He had been in her care for five months—a bright, difficult, genuinely engaging client whose presenting depression was layered over a philosophical crisis of faith that made ordinary therapeutic approaches feel, to him and sometimes to her, structurally inadequate. He had been the client who challenged her. Who asked her the hard questions. Whose sessions had been, if she was honest, the ones she looked forward to most.

She had been, she understood now with a clarity that the intervening decade had made possible, too personally invested in his progress. Not inappropriately—not in any way that violated professional ethics. But in the way that a counselor sometimes becomes too invested in a brilliant, difficult client whose struggle mirrors questions the counselor has not fully resolved in their own interior: she had wanted Daniel to find his way through because she had wanted to watch the finding, because the watching had nourished something in her that she had not been properly monitoring.

When the signals had begun to indicate heightened risk, she had assessed them with less clinical objectivity than she would have brought to a less personally engaging client. She had leaned toward the interpretation that served the continuation of the work rather than the interpretation that required the escalation that might have interrupted it.

Daniel had died on a Tuesday afternoon in March, eleven years ago. His roommate had found him. His department advisor had called Peggy. She had driven to the hospital and had stood in a corridor for a long time looking at nothing and then she had driven home and she had sat at her kitchen table and she had said to herself, with the precision she brought to every difficult thing: this is your professional failure. You missed the signals you should have caught. You escalated too slowly. This is on you.

> *What I have never said, in eleven years, is this: I loved Daniel Price. Not inappropriately — not in violation of any ethical boundary. But I loved him the way a teacher loves the student who is most alive in the room, the way a doctor loves the patient who fights hardest, with the specific love that is reserved for people who cost you something. And when he died I did not let myself grieve because grief would have meant admitting the love and admitting the love would have meant examining the investment and examining the investment would have meant asking whether the investment had compromised the clinical judgment I had been paid to provide. So I turned it into guilt instead. Clean professional guilt, containable and documentable and manageable. And I have carried the guilt for eleven years because the grief was too complicated to carry.*

She set down the pen.

She sat in the silence of her study for a long time.

She thought about what it meant that the Enemy had known the difference. Had known that behind the professional guilt—which she had processed and repented of and covered—there was the personal grief that she had never allowed. And had known that the unlived grief was the actual foothold. The guilt was the decoy. It was the grief that had kept the room locked and the room that had kept the access open.

She wept for Daniel Price.

She wept for him the way she had not been able to weep for him in the corridor of the hospital, for the twenty-eight-year-old philosopher who had asked the hardest questions and who had deserved better than a counselor whose personal investment had, in one critical window, compromised the clinical clarity he needed her to have.

She wept for herself—the thirty-two-year-old version who had driven home from the hospital and sat at the kitchen table and chosen the manageable guilt over the unmeasurable grief because she was a professional and professionals manage.

She wept until there was nothing left.

And then she prayed the prayer that she had been unable to pray in October because she had not yet excavated down to the level where this prayer lived:

"Lord, I give You Daniel. I give You my love for him and my failure toward him and my grief about both of those things. I am not going to manage this anymore. I am giving You the room that I have kept locked for eleven years because I did not know how to open it without the whole interior of myself being too much for me to stand. I am trusting that You are bigger than what is in the room. I am trusting that Your grace is sufficient for the therapist who missed the signals as well as for the client who was lost. I am trusting that there is no room in me that You cannot enter and that what You enter You heal and that healing, even at this distance, even for this, is real."

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

She stayed on her knees for a long time after the prayer.

When she rose, the room was the same room it had always been: her books, her desk, the lamp, Ezra watching from the ottoman with an expression of specific feline concern. Nothing visible had changed.

Everything interior had changed.

She could feel it the way you feel a shift in the atmospheric pressure before weather—not seen but physically unmistakable, registered in the body before it is processed by the mind. Something that had been taut in her for eleven years had released. Not the guilt, which was real and appropriate and would continue to inform her practice with the specific, chastened care of a practitioner who has been taught her limits from the inside. But the grief. The grief had been allowed. Had been received. Had been, in the receiving, transformed from a locked room into a scar—visible, real, present, but no longer a door.

## VI.

She called Ruth on Thursday night.

Her sister answered on the second ring with the alert, pre-caffeinated energy of someone who has been up since five. “I’ve been thinking about you all week,” Ruth said, before Peggy had spoken more than her name. “I’ve been praying you through something. I didn’t know what.”

“You knew enough,” Peggy said.

She told Ruth what she had found in the week of preparation. Not everything—some of it was still too newly excavated to handle in conversation, too tender at the edges to be fully articulate. But the shape of it. The locked rooms and what had been in them. The seventeen years of managed grief for the marriage and the nineteen years of guarded distance from pastoral authority and the eleven years of professional guilt standing in for personal grief for Daniel.

Ruth listened in the particular way she had always listened—without interrupting, without the therapeutic reflections that Peggy’s professional associates tended to offer in personal conversations, with the simple and total quality of a woman giving another woman her full attention because she loves her and the loving is sufficient reason.

When Peggy finished, Ruth was quiet for a moment.

Then she said: “Peggy. Can I ask you something?”

“Ask.”

“In all of this—the work, the sessions, the deliverance, the team, all of it—have you let anybody love you? Not pray for you. Not cover you. Not support the ministry. Love you. The person. The fifty-four-year-old woman who is tired and was married once and lost a client and was hurt by a pastor she trusted and has been fighting a spiritual war for six months in a small town in Virginia?”

Peggy was quiet for a long moment.

“Tamika,” she said finally. “Tamika sees me.”

“Good,” Ruth said. “I’m glad. Anyone else?”

A longer pause. The honest answer was more complicated than a name. The honest answer was that she had, in the intensity of the work, allowed herself to be sustained by the communal prayer and the team accountability and the intellectual stimulation of the engagement—all of which were real forms of care—while maintaining, underneath them, the specific loneliness of a person who has not been personally, tenderly, unclinically loved in a very long time.

"Not really," she said.

"Then receive this," Ruth said. Not sentimentally—with the directness that was the family characteristic, the thing they had both inherited from their mother who had never wasted words when direct ones would do. "I love you. I have been praying for you since September and I will pray for you until one of us is dead and after that I expect to continue. You are not alone in the specific way that matters most. You have never been alone in that way. And whatever you found this week in those locked rooms—you didn't find it alone. He was in there with you the whole time."

Peggy sat at her kitchen table with the phone in her hand and said nothing for a moment.

"I know," she said. And she did. Not as comfort or as theological assertion. As the lived, verified, tested knowledge of a woman who had spent a week opening rooms she had kept locked for years and had found, in every one, that He had been there before her.

> *"Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me." — Psalm 139:7–10 (NKJV)*

## VII.

On Friday, she met with Eze.

She had driven to Charlottesville, as she had before the October deliverance session, because some conversations require the physical presence of the other person. She arrived at Redeemer's House at nine in the morning and sat across from Eze in his study and told him what the week had contained. She read from her journal. She told him about Thomas and the locked grief of seventeen years. About David Mercer and the nineteen years of guarded distance. About Daniel and the discovery that professional guilt had been standing in front of personal grief like a sentry, keeping the real wound hidden even from her own examination.

Eze listened with his eyes closed, which she knew now to mean that he was both listening and praying simultaneously, processing the content of what she was saying through the filter of both pastoral discernment and intercessory attention.

When she finished, he opened his eyes.

"You understand what you have just done," he said. Not a question.

"I think so," she said. "I have cleared the terrain that was being used against me. Closed the doors that were open not because of deliberate occult involvement but because of the ordinary, human, entirely non-dramatic practice of managing pain rather than grieving it."

"Yes," he said. "And I want to say something that I believe you need to hear, coming from outside yourself. What you have described—the three locked rooms, the speed with which you moved through the October inventory, the competence that substituted for surrender—this is not unusual. This is the specific occupational hazard of people who are gifted at helping others process what they themselves avoid processing. I have seen it in pastors and doctors and counselors and prayer ministers and missionaries. The helper who does not know how to receive help. The healer who has not fully submitted their own wounds to the Healer."

He leaned forward slightly. "What you have done this week is not a remediation. It is not the correction of a mistake that should not have happened. It is a maturation. You were not ready in October to go where this week has taken you. The work of the autumn was necessary to build the platform on which this week's work could stand. God did not withhold this from you. He sequenced it. He knew that you needed to stand in those rooms in Clarksburg before you could stand in your own."

She sat with this for a long time.

"And now?" she asked.

"Now," he said, "you are more prepared than you were. Not perfectly prepared—none of us are ever perfectly prepared for the work we are called to. But the rooms are open. The footholds are addressed. The armor is, as fully as I have seen it in a practitioner of your experience, on." He paused. "We go to Hallow's Creek tomorrow."

> *"For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account." — Hebrews 4:12–13 (NKJV)*

## VIII.

That night, the Friday before the going, Peggy sat in her study for a long time.

She was not praying in any structured sense. She was sitting in the presence of God the way she sat in the presence of someone she knew well and trusted completely—without agenda, without prepared speech, simply available. Present. The way a person sits with their oldest and best companion in the quiet hour of the evening when the day is done and there is nothing left to accomplish and being together is the whole of the purpose.

She thought about the three locked rooms and what had been in them and what had come out of them in the past five days. She thought about Thomas and the thirty-six-year-old woman who had not been allowed to mourn her own marriage. About David Mercer and the nineteen years of guarded distance that had been eating quietly at her capacity for genuine spiritual trust. About Daniel and the grief that had been disguised as guilt for so long that she had forgotten it was grief.

She thought: the adversary is not creative. It uses what is already there. The locked rooms are not created by the adversary—they are created by the ordinary mechanics of human pain avoidance and professional competence and the specific failure of strong people to receive what they freely give. The adversary does not dig the room. It simply finds the door.

She thought: and the Lord is not surprised by the rooms. He has been in them before she opened them. He was in the room with Thomas's grief when she locked it in March seventeen years ago. He was in the room with the wound from David Mercer. He was in the room with Daniel. He has been waiting, with a patience that exceeds anything she can conceptualize, for the moment when she was ready to open the doors and find Him there.

He does not wait outside. He waits inside. That is not a theological comfort. That is the most specific and personal fact about the nature of God that she has ever received.

> *Friday, February 7th. Tomorrow we go to Hallow's Creek. I want to write what this week has been, because I will need the record of it later. Not the details — I have those in other pages. The essence. This week I found out that I have been a healer who needed healing. A counselor who needed counseling. A person who has been teaching surrender for twenty-two years who had not, in three specific rooms of her own interior, surrendered. I found this out not because the Enemy showed it to me — the Enemy showed me the distortion of it, weaponized and deployed in the nightmares and the assault. I found it out because the Lord, who is a better diagnostician than any adversary, showed it to me in the specific, kindly, precise way that He shows people true things about themselves: not to condemn them but*

> *to heal them. Not as accusation. As invitation. The rooms are open. He was in them before I arrived. He will be in Hallow's Creek before we arrive. I am not the same person I was in September. I am not the same person I was last Monday. I am being made, day by day, into something I could not have predicted and would not have chosen and would not give back for anything in this world. Lord — whatever tomorrow holds. You are already there. Go before us. And I will follow wherever You lead. Amen.*

She closed the journal.

She checked the locks. She turned off the lamp. She stood at the window for a moment in the dark, looking out at the February night—clear, cold, the stars very bright in the way of winter stars that have no warmth to diffuse their light.

She thought about the ancient doorway in the hills fourteen miles east, standing open since the 1870s, rooted in something older still, patient and organized and unaccustomed to the specific quality of opposition that was coming for it tomorrow.

She thought: it does not know what is coming.

She thought: but He does.

She went to bed.

She slept deeply, without dreaming, in the house that belonged to God, in the life that was not her own, on the night before the going.

And in the morning, she rose.

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*End of Chapter Thirteen*

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# *The Valley of Decision*

> *“Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision.” — Joel 3:14 (NKJV)*

> *“And I saw in those days how long cords were given to those angels, and they took to themselves wings and flew, and they went towards the north. And I asked the angel, saying unto him: ‘Why have those angels taken these cords and gone off?’ And he said unto me: ‘They have gone to prepare the chains for Satan and his hosts.’” — 1 Enoch 69:28 (R.H. Charles translation)*

## I.

She had been a counselor for twenty-two years and she had learned, early and with the kind of certainty that only direct experience produces, that the hardest truth in her profession was this: she could not want freedom for her clients more than they wanted it for themselves.

She could illuminate. She could accompany. She could provide the safest possible environment for the terrifying work of genuine change. She could pray, in ways she had not prayed in September, with an authority and a specificity that could shift the spiritual atmosphere of a room. She could bring the team, arrange the prayer cover, stand in the gap for an entire community’s spiritual territory.

She could not choose.

The will, as Eze had said in the very beginning of all this, was the door. And Christ did not force it. Which meant that Peggy could not force it either. And which meant that the weeks of February, in the days between the preparation of Chapter Thirteen and the going to Hallow’s Creek that would come in Chapter Fifteen, were also weeks in which the people she had been walking alongside reached, each in their own time and their own way, the point that every serious engagement with truth eventually produces: the place where the path forks and the choice must be made and no one can make it for you.

She had always known this moment existed in every clinical relationship. She had not, until this season, understood how large it was. How much depended on it. How the eternal weight of a human choice made in an ordinary room in an ordinary February, between sessions, over a cup of tea, in the private darkness of a four-in-the-morning reckoning, could be the hinge

on which a life turned—and kept turning, in one direction or another, long after the moment itself had passed into memory.

She began to understand this more fully in the second week of February, when five of the people she had been walking alongside reached their crossroads in the same ten-day window and made their choices, each one different and each one permanent in its own way.

> *"I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live." — Deuteronomy 30:19 (NKJV)*

## II.

Raymond Okafor chose on a Monday.

He came to the center in the morning with the membership certificate in an envelope and his jaw set in the way Peggy had come to recognize as his decision face—the expression of a man who has been a history teacher long enough to know that facts must be faced directly or they will govern indirectly, and who has decided that the fact before him now is too significant for indirection.

He set the envelope on the desk between them. He did not open it. He did not need to. They both knew what was in it.

"I want to renounce it," he said. Not "I think I should" or "I've been considering." I want to renounce it. The specific active voice of a man who has spent a week in his own version of the interior work Peggy had done and who has arrived at the same place by a different road: the understanding that what he has found in his wife's papers is not only her history but the explanation for the voice that came in the nights and the understanding of why the voice had targeted him with such devastating precision and the understanding that the targeting had a source and the source had a name and the name could be addressed.

"I want to formally sever whatever connection her membership created to my household," he said. "I want to close whatever door her involvement opened—not to dishonor her memory, because I believe she left that involvement years before her death and I believe she loved God

genuinely in her final years. I want to close it because it is open and because open doors are dangerous and because she cannot close it herself and I am the one she left behind."

His voice was steady throughout. The steadiness was not the absence of grief—she could see the grief in him, settled and present and real. It was something that had come through the grief and out the other side: the specific steadiness of a man who has faced the full weight of a difficult truth and has not been broken by it.

They prayed together for forty-five minutes. Peggy led. Raymond followed with the specific, focused engagement of a man learning a new vocabulary—the language of spiritual authority and renunciation and the closing of generational access—and applying it with the methodical care of someone for whom language has always been the primary instrument of understanding.

When they finished, he picked up the envelope.

"Where do we burn it?" he asked.

They burned it in the center's small back garden, in the clay pot Tamika kept for exactly this purpose, which had become over the preceding months the repository of a small accumulation of dedicated objects that required disposal by fire: Raymond's wife's certificate, several objects from Lydia's aunt's estate, and a photograph that Carla Simmons had brought from her childhood that she had not been able to explain and had not needed to.

Raymond watched the certificate burn with the expression of a man performing an act of love for someone who is no longer there to receive it.

Peggy stood beside him in the cold February garden and said nothing, because nothing was the right thing to say.

> *"So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." — John 8:36 (NIV)*

## III.

Carla Simmons chose on a Wednesday, and her choice was not the one Peggy had hoped for.

She had been moving, across the eight weeks since she began attending the center, in a direction that Peggy had tracked with the specific attention of a practitioner who knows the difference between genuine movement toward truth and the performance of progress that sometimes precedes the decision to stop. Carla had been genuine. She had been doing real work. She had disclosed the childhood memories of the gatherings in the stone building, she had allowed Peggy to explore the grandmother's spiritual history in Haiti, she had agreed to the additional questions about her own spiritual involvement that the new intake protocol required.

And then, on a Wednesday morning, she came in looking as she had on that first day: the slightly hollowed quality of someone afraid of themselves. But it was different now. The hollowness in February was not the uncertain hollowness of a woman who does not know what is wrong with her. It was the specific hollowness of someone who knows exactly what is wrong and has decided not to address it.

"I need to step back from the sessions," she said, before Peggy had settled into her chair.

Peggy received this without visible reaction. "Tell me what's driving that."

What followed was a twenty-minute account that Peggy listened to carefully and that she understood, with the experience of the past months, at two levels simultaneously. At the surface level it was a reasonable-sounding collection of practical concerns: the sessions were emotionally demanding, she had a new position at work that was consuming her energy, she felt she had made enough progress to manage on her own for a while. Each of these had its own internal logic. Together they formed the architecture of retreat.

Below the surface level—in the territory Peggy had learned to read with an attention that went beyond the clinical—she could see what was actually happening. Carla had reached the point in the work where the next step required a decision about who she belonged to. Not an abstract theological decision but a specific, volitional, costly one: to renounce by name the spiritual inheritance of her grandmother's practice, to close the doors that had been open since before her birth, to submit what had been dedicated to something else to the authority of Christ. She had been standing at this door for two weeks and she was choosing, this morning, to walk away from it.

Peggy did not argue. She had learned, at considerable cost, that argument at this juncture was worse than useless: it positioned the counselor as the force compelling the decision rather than the client as the free person making it, and it gave the resistance something to push against, and it violated the fundamental principle that Eze had stated in the very beginning: the will is the door. Christ does not force it.

She said, with the full weight of her care for Carla and her respect for Carla's autonomy: "I understand. I want you to know two things before you go. The first is that this door is always open. If you decide to come back, you come back to the same place we left off, without any judgment about the time between. The second is that what you are walking away from today will still be here when you return—and I mean that in the fullest sense of both parts of it. The work will be here. And so will what the work is designed to address."

Carla looked at her for a long moment. There was, in her expression, something Peggy had learned to recognize across a career of watching people choose: the look of someone who knows, in the part of themselves that is most honest, that the choice they are making is not the right one and who is making it anyway because the right choice is more frightening than the wrong one in the immediate moment.

"Thank you," Carla said. And she left.

Peggy sat in the chair for a long time after the door closed.

> *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" — Matthew 23:37 (NKJV)*

She did not weep. She had learned, in this work, to hold the grief of the unchosen with a specific quality of steadiness that was neither cold nor performative but simply: present with the weight of it without being broken by it. She had been moved, across the autumn and winter, from a counselor who believed in human freedom abstractly to one who had experienced its full dimensions: the glory of it when Lydia chose, the cost of it when Carla did not.

She prayed for Carla Simmons with the specific, unglamorous prayer of someone who has learned that the most important prayers are often the ones prayed for people who have walked away: Lord, keep the door open in her. Don't let what is after her have the last word. Let what is true reach her wherever she goes. And let her find her way back when she is ready.

She wrote Carla's name in her journal that evening under a heading she had not used before: "Waiting." Not lost. Waiting.

## IV.

Sandra Beaumont chose on a Thursday evening, and her choice had the quality of something long-considered finally executed.

She had been attending a Thursday evening Bible study at Calvary Bible—Gerald's, the one he ran for people who were navigating spiritual complexity with intellectual seriousness—for six weeks, alongside her continued sessions with Peggy. The two had worked in concert: the clinical space giving her room to process and the theological space giving her the framework to understand what she was processing. She had been, in Peggy's assessment, the quietest of the people moving through the work—not dramatically afflicted, not dramatically progressing, but steady in the specific way of a woman who has decided to take her time because she is going to get this right.

She arrived for her Thursday session with a piece of paper in her hand. Not the Scripture list Peggy had given her clients—something she had written herself. She set it on the table between them and looked at Peggy with the composed directness of a retired librarian who has organized her thoughts and is ready to present them.

"I've made a list," she said. "Of every specific thing I am renouncing and every specific lie I am no longer choosing to believe. I want to read it aloud. Is that the right thing to do?"

"Yes," Peggy said. "That is exactly the right thing to do."

Sandra read from her list. It was thirteen items long, written in the precise cataloguing style of a woman who spent forty years organizing information for public use and who brought the same thoroughness to organizing the architecture of her own spiritual liberation. Each item was specific. Each one named a lie she had believed, a shame she had carried, a door she had held open by believing the accuser's version of her own history rather than God's.

She read without trembling, in the level voice of someone who has already done the trembling in private and has arrived at this moment resolved. When she reached the final item—the private sins that the visitation in her bedroom had attempted to weaponize—she paused for only a moment before reading it the same way she had read the others. Clearly. Aloud. Into the room.

Then she said: "I renounce the authority of shame over my life. I renounce the power of the accuser to use my past as a claim against my present. These things are under the blood of Jesus Christ and they belong to Him and they are not available to any other entity for any other purpose. This is my declaration and I make it of my own free will in the name of Jesus Christ and I mean every word of it."

> *"And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death." — Revelation 12:11 (NKJV)*

Peggy prayed over Sandra's declaration with the full weight of the authority she had been learning to carry—naming each item of the list before God and before whatever had claimed jurisdiction over it and closing each one specifically and by name in the blood of Christ. The session lasted two hours. Sandra left looking the way Lydia had looked after the night in the lower hall: lighter. Not free of all difficulty—the estrangement from her daughter remained real and painful and would require its own work. But free of the specific, crushing weight of a shame that had been used as a weapon.

Sandra shook Peggy's hand at the door. Not an embrace—Sandra Beaumont was not an embracing woman, which was an entirely appropriate form of human individuality that Peggy respected. The handshake was firm and lasted precisely the right number of seconds and communicated, in the specific language of a woman who means what she does, everything it needed to.

Peggy walked back to her office and sat down and said, quietly, to no one visible in the room: "Thank You."

## V.

Nora Ellison's crossroads came not in a session but in a conversation at Carol Briggs's kitchen table on a Saturday afternoon, which Carol reported to Peggy on Monday with the contained satisfaction of someone who has witnessed something significant and has the good sense to recognize it.

Nora had been three months out from her baptism. She was working—part-time, at a bookshop in Clarksburg, which she had described to Peggy as the most normal thing she had done in two years and which she was treating with the specific, grateful attention of someone who has learned not to take normalcy for granted. She was attending Sunday worship at Calvary Bible. She was meeting weekly with Peggy for what had become a different kind of session than the early ones: not crisis management or spiritual triage but the slower, sustained work of building a life on a foundation she was newly occupying.

The crossroads came when Nora received a message from one of the members of the circle—the group she had been part of in college, the one whose ritual in April had opened the door through which Desolation had entered. The message was not threatening. It was warm. It expressed concern for her welfare. It invited her to reconnect.

Nora had read the message on her phone on a Saturday afternoon and had gone immediately to Carol—not because she needed to be told what to do, but because she had learned, in three months of being part of a community that functioned as the body of Christ was intended to function, that the right response to a significant moment was not to navigate it alone.

"She showed me the message and she looked at me," Carol had told Peggy, "and she said: I already know what the answer is. I just don't want to say it alone."

They had said it together. Carol and Nora at the kitchen table, the phone on the table between them, both of them looking at the message. And Nora had typed her response: she was not able to reconnect with the group. She wished the person who had written well. She would be praying for them. And she would not be responding to further contact.

She sent it. She set the phone down. And then, Carol said, she had sat very still for a moment and her expression had done something Carol did not have the specific clinical vocabulary to describe but that Peggy, when she heard it, recognized immediately: the specific quality of a door closing. Not dramatically. With the quiet finality of something that has been decided, chosen, committed to, and sealed.

> *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." — 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NKJV)*

Peggy sat with what Carol had described for a long time after the call.

She thought about Nora—the girl who had arrived barefoot on a September porch, pale and frightened and occupied by something that was not her. Who had walked in with no appointment and asked for the one who prays. Who had sat in the window chair with her knees to her chest and said: I'm not alone in my body. Who had prayed the honest unadorned prayer on a Tuesday midnight and felt the pressing thing flinch and pull back and in the space left behind had felt, for the first time in months, located.

She thought about the Saturday afternoon at Carol's kitchen table. Nora looking at a message that offered her the warm familiarity of a world she had left, and choosing instead the world she had entered, and knowing enough to choose it in community rather than alone.

She thought: this is what healing looks like from the outside. Not the dramatic night. Not the deliverance session. The Saturday afternoon at a kitchen table when a young woman looks at a door she has closed and keeps it closed.

That, she thought, was the whole point.

## VI.

Marcus Tilley's crossroads came in a form Peggy had not anticipated, which was how most of the significant moments in this work arrived: sideways, at an angle she had not been watching.

It came on a Tuesday evening. He had been at a friend's house—a friend from school, not from church, a distinction that mattered only in that the friend was not yet operating with the specific framework that Marcus had been building since November. The friend had a cousin. The cousin had been at the gathering. The gathering had been, without anyone at it necessarily knowing the full significance of what they were attending, the kind of evening that the Order of the Hollow Gate used for initial contact with potential recruits: casual, social, seemingly innocuous, held in an ordinary house in an ordinary neighborhood, with nothing explicitly occult about its surface.

Marcus had recognized it. Not because he had been briefed about the Order—he had not, specifically. But because the quality of the atmosphere in the room had activated in him something that had not been there before November: a sensitivity, developed through months of deliverance and prayer and the growing awareness of spiritual reality, that registered the presence of something wrong before his conscious mind had assembled the evidence.

He had left. Quietly, without drama, without explanation. He had walked out of the gathering and stood on the sidewalk in the February cold and called his grandmother.

Dottie had answered on the first ring. She had not asked many questions. She had said: "Come home. I'll be praying until you get here."

He had come home. He had told Dottie what he had sensed and she had confirmed, without surprise, that his instincts were correct. They had prayed together in Dottie's kitchen,

grandmother and grandson, for forty-five minutes. And then Marcus had gone to bed and slept without interruption, which he reported to Peggy the following day with the understated satisfaction of someone who has used a new skill successfully for the first time.

"I knew what it was," he said, in Peggy's office. "Before I could have told you why I knew. I just knew. Is that—is that what discernment feels like?"

"Yes," Peggy said. "That is exactly what discernment feels like."

He sat with this for a moment. Then he said, with the specific gravity of a seventeen-year-old who has just understood something about himself that is larger than he has words for: "I have a responsibility now. Don't I. Because I can see it. I have a responsibility to do something about it when I see it."

Peggy looked at Marcus Tilley and she thought: yes. You have been trained. And now, like every person who has been trained, you will spend the rest of your life being asked to use what you have been taught.

"Yes," she said. "But slowly. And with support. And with the humility of someone who knows that the gift they carry is borrowed. You walk back into the world with this, Marcus, the same way I walked into this work: one step at a time, in community, under authority, with your hand firmly in the hand of the One who gave you what you carry."

> *"For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." — Romans 11:29 (NKJV)*

## VII.

The fifth crossroads was the one Peggy had been most dreading and most carefully preparing for.

It was Lydia's.

Not the question of Lydia's freedom—that had been settled in the lower hall of Calvary Bible on a November Saturday night. This was a different crossroads, and a harder one in some ways: the question of what Lydia would do with the freedom she had been given.

Lydia came to the center on a Friday—not for a session, since the formal clinical relationship had concluded in December. She came the way people come when they have something to say that requires the specific container of the space where the significant things between them had happened. She sat in the window chair and she looked at Peggy and she said, with the directness that was her truest characteristic:

"I've been thinking about what happened to me. Not processing it—I've done that, with you and with Gerald and with David and with God. I mean thinking about it in terms of what I am supposed to do with it."

"Tell me," Peggy said.

"I grew up in a line that had opened doors it should not have opened. I know that now. I know what was invited in and what it cost three generations of my family. I know that the doors are closed and the claim is revoked and I am free—truly free, in a way I can feel in my body every morning when I wake up without the weight on my chest." She paused. "But here is what I have been thinking. The doors were closed for me. In my line. In my specific family's history. That doesn't mean the doors are closed everywhere in this community. I know what my grandmother opened. I know there are other grandmothers—other family lines, other histories—where the same kind of thing was invited in and never addressed."

She looked at Peggy steadily.

"I want to help," she said. "I don't mean I want to be a deliverance minister or a counselor—I know my limits and I respect yours. But I grew up in this community. I know families. I know histories. I can recognize, in a way that someone from outside cannot, the signs of what I lived with for eight months. I can have conversations that you cannot have. I can sit with people who would not come to a counseling center and say: I know what this is. I have been in it. And there is a way out."

The room was quiet.

Peggy thought about what Eze had said: God did not assemble you as a solitary warrior. As a catalyst. The battle is the Church's battle.

She thought: and this is how the Church's battle expands. Not through professionals and pastors and deliverance ministers alone. Through the freed ones. Through the people who have been inside the darkness and come out and can speak about it from the inside.

“Yes,” she said. “With accountability and with prayer cover and with the clear understanding of where your role begins and where it ends. Yes. Lydia Crane, I believe you are exactly the person for exactly what you are describing.”

Lydia nodded once. “Good,” she said. “Where do we start?”

> *“You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.” — Matthew 5:14–15 (NKJV)*

## VIII.

She wrote the five names in her journal that Friday evening, in a column, as she had written lists throughout this season:

### THE VALLEY OF DECISION — FEBRUARY

> **Raymond Okafor** *Choice: Renunciation, on behalf of his wife and his household.* He burned the certificate in the back garden and watched it become ash and stood in the cold with the specific expression of a man who has performed an act of love for someone who is no longer there to receive it. He is free. She is at peace. The door is closed.

> **Carla Simmons** *Choice: Withdrawal, for now.* She knows what is waiting for her when she returns. It will be there. So will we. Her name is in the Waiting column. Not Lost. Waiting. I trust the One who goes after the one lost sheep not to let her stay lost.

> **Sandra Beaumont** *Choice: Declaration — thirteen items, read aloud, in full.* She shook my hand at the door with the firm, precise grip of a woman who has organized forty years of information and has now organized the most important information of her life. Shame has no claim on her. The accuser has been told so, specifically, in the language it understands. She goes home lighter.

> **Nora Ellison** *Choice: The closed door, held closed, at Carol's kitchen table.* She said: I already know what the answer is. I just don't want to say it alone. She is learning what community is for. She will not unlearn it. The circle offered her warmth. She chose the Light.

> **Marcus Tilley** *Choice: To walk out of the gathering and call his grandmother.* He used his discernment correctly the first time he needed it. He is seventeen years old and he has gifts he is only beginning to understand. He has a grandmother who answers the phone on the first ring. He is going to be magnificent.

She closed the journal and sat in the quiet of the Friday evening.

She thought about the valley of decision and what it actually contained. Not abstraction. Five people. Five specific, individual, unrepeatable human beings, each carrying their own history and their own wounds and their own particular capacity for both damage and grace, each arriving at their own version of the fork in the road in their own time and in their own way and making their own choice.

Four who had chosen, in one form or another, the light. One who had walked away—not toward the dark, she believed, but sideways, into a holding pattern that God was not finished with. She trusted Him with that.

She thought about the eternal weight of human choice. Not in the abstract theological way she had thought about it in seminary, in the clean language of predestination and free will and the doctrinal frameworks that organized the conversation without necessarily conveying its human weight. In the specific way of a woman who had been in the room when five people reached their crossroads and had been privileged to stand at the fork and watch which way they turned.

She thought: this is the most significant thing a human being can witness. Not the deliverance—which was extraordinary and real and she would never diminish it. The choice. The moment when a person, in full possession of their own will and their own understanding of what is before them, reaches toward God or turns away. That moment. That fraction of eternity compressed into a human decision made in a February room.

She thought: I have been given a seat at the table of the most important thing there is.

She thought: Lord, don't let me waste it.

> *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me." — Revelation 3:20 (NKJV)*

> *February 14th. Five crossroads in ten days. Four who turned toward the light, one who turned sideways and is not finished turning. I have learned this month that the valley of decision is not a dramatic place. It is the Tuesday morning when Raymond brings an envelope and says: I want to renounce this. The Wednesday when Carla says: I need to step back. The Thursday evening when Sandra reads from a handwritten list in the level voice of a woman who has already done her trembling. The Saturday afternoon at Carol's kitchen table. The Tuesday evening when a seventeen-year-old walks out of a gathering because something in him that wasn't there before November knows when something is wrong. The valley of decision is every room where a human being arrives at the fork. And God is at the fork. Not waiting at the end of the road that was chosen correctly. At the fork. Present at the moment of choosing, before the choice is made, not forcing but not absent. This is what I will carry from this February into whatever comes next. Not the dramatic moments — those I will carry too, but differently. This: that every person who walks through my door is walking toward a fork. My job is to accompany them faithfully enough, and to pray faithfully enough, and to love them specifically enough, that when they reach the fork they are not reaching it alone. Tomorrow we begin the final preparation for Hallow's Creek. Lord — let me be worthy of the seat You have given me at this table.*

She closed the journal.

She turned off the lamp.

Outside the window the February night held Clarksburg in its cold and honest grip, and somewhere in those streets and houses and ordinary February lives, five people were carrying their choices forward into the next day. Four lighter. One still carrying what she had not yet set down. All of them held by the One who stands at the fork.

All of them, in His hands.

Which was, she had learned this season, the only place any of them had ever been safe.

❖ ❖ ❖

*End of Chapter Fourteen*

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# *The Final Confrontation*

> *"The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still." — Exodus 14:14 (NIV)*

> *"And the Lord said unto Michael: 'Go, bind Semyaza and his associates who have united themselves with women… bind them fast for seventy generations in the valleys of the earth, till the day of their judgment and of their consummation, till the judgment that is for ever and ever is consummated.'" — 1 Enoch 10:11–12 (R.H. Charles translation)*

### I.

The second Saturday of February arrived with the particular quality of light that appears in the Virginia hills in mid-winter—not warm, not welcoming, but absolute. The kind of light that leaves nothing in shadow. The sky was the pale, hard blue of polished steel, and the bare trees along the ridge lines stood in their winter architecture like deliberate marks against it, and the road east from Clarksburg toward Hallow's Creek cut through the frost-silvered landscape with the clean directness of a sentence that knows where it is going.

They went in two vehicles.

Eze drove himself in the silver sedan. Gerald rode with him. In Peggy's car: Tamika in the passenger seat, Marjorie in the back with her medical bag and her thermos and the composed readiness she brought to every significant event. Five people, one direction, fourteen miles of hill country between them and a stone arch in the woods above a town that had been living in the shadow of something for a hundred and fifty years.

Pastor Elias Croft had arranged for them to come to Shepherd's Gate Fellowship at nine o'clock. He had arranged, additionally, for forty intercessors from four different Hallow's Creek congregations to begin prayer at six in the morning and to continue unbroken until the team arrived. He had told Peggy this on the phone with the quiet intensity of a man who has been praying about this day for six months and who intends, when it arrives, to have the spiritual ground as prepared as human faithfulness can prepare it.

The drive took twenty-two minutes. Peggy drove in silence, which Tamika did not attempt to fill, which Marjorie honored with her own quiet, which was the prayer kind. The hills came up around them on either side—old hills, rounded and dark with bare hardwood and cedar, with the particular quality of landscapes that have seen a great deal of human time pass through them and have their own long memory.

She thought: He is already there.

She thought: He has been there longer than whatever we are driving toward has been there.

She thought: then let's go.

> *"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, even though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea." — Psalm 46:1–2 (NKJV)*

## II.

### 9:00 A.M. — SHEPHERD'S GATE FELLOWSHIP, HALLOW'S CREEK

Pastor Elias Croft was a smaller man than his voice on the phone had suggested—compact, fifties, with close-cropped gray hair and the deeply creased face of someone who has spent his ministry in a community that has asked more of him than seminary prepared him for. He met them in the parking lot of the small church building and shook each hand with the grip of someone who is measuring, in the handshake, whether the people arriving are who he needs them to be.

He held Eze's hand longest. Something passed between the two men in that handshake that Peggy could not name but recognized: the specific acknowledgment of two people who have operated in the same territory and know the terrain by the same set of landmarks.

"Thank you for coming," Croft said. He said it as though he had been holding the words for a long time and was relieved to finally release them.

Inside the church, the forty intercessors were in the sanctuary—not a formal prayer meeting, not organized rows of pews facing a platform, but a gathering of people distributed through the space in postures of individual prayer, some seated, some kneeling, some standing with their hands raised and their lips moving, some simply still with their eyes closed in the focused interior attention of people who have been doing this since six in the morning and are not tired because the energy they are drawing on is not their own.

The atmosphere of the room was immediately and unmistakably different from the ordinary sanctuary atmosphere of a Sunday morning. It had the quality—familiar to Peggy now in a way it had not been five months ago—of ground that has been contested and is being held. Not peaceful exactly: present. Purposefully occupied. Like a room in which the right people are standing in the right places.

She stood in the doorway for a moment before entering.

She thought: this is what the Church is supposed to look like. Not every Sunday. On the Saturdays before the significant things.

## III.

### 9:45 A.M. — THE MEETING WITH ANNA

Her name was Anna Voss.

Not Margaret Voss—the pale-eyed woman who had come for Lydia's book. Anna was Margaret's daughter, thirty-eight years old, and she had been in the Order of the Hollow Gate since she was sixteen, inducted by her mother in a ceremony she described with the specific, halting precision of someone dismantling a structure they have lived inside so long they have trouble seeing its edges from the outside.

She had been trying to leave for two years.

She sat across from Peggy and Eze in Pastor Croft's small office with her hands folded on the desk between them and her eyes doing the specific thing that Peggy had learned to read

across months of this work: not the occupant pressing toward the surface, but the exhausted vigilance of a person who has been watching their own interior for the signs of something pressing and has maintained the watch for so long that the watching has become indistinguishable from living.

"I want to be out," she said. No preamble. No navigation. The directness of someone who has spent two years circling the thing she is about to say and is done circling. "Completely out. Whatever that requires. I have two daughters. They are eleven and nine. I will not—" Her voice tightened. "I will not give my daughters what my mother gave me."

The love of a mother for her daughters. It was, Peggy thought, one of the most powerful forces she had encountered in this work—not because it was always sufficient to produce the right choice, but because when it aligned with the right choice it produced a quality of determination that very little in the spiritual realm could withstand. Lydia had been freed because she chose freedom. Anna Voss was choosing freedom because she refused to be the link in a chain that bound her children.

The distinction mattered. Both were valid. Both were real. And Peggy had learned, across five months of watching people reach their crossroads, that the specific motivation for the right choice was less significant than the choice itself.

She looked at Anna Voss and she said: "Tell me everything. From the beginning. We have time, and we are not going anywhere until you are free."

> *"He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it." — 1 Thessalonians 5:24 (NKJV)*

Anna talked for ninety minutes.

What she described was the Order of the Hollow Gate from the inside: its structure, its rituals, its language, its specific dedications and what those dedications had opened, and the way it had operated in the Hallow's Creek community for the entirety of her conscious memory. Eze asked precise questions. Peggy documented with the methodical attention of a practitioner who understands that what is being mapped now will inform not only this session but everything that follows it.

The Order had a formal hierarchy. A governing council of seven, of which Margaret Voss was the senior member. Eleven dedicated practitioners. An outer circle of associates who

participated in certain rituals without full knowledge of the structure they were participating in—the intake mechanism, the net that had caught Nora's college circle and Raymond's wife and Carla's parents and dozens of others across four decades that Peggy could now, with the map Anna was providing, trace to their source.

At the center of the structure—the thing to which all the rituals of dedication and invitation had been directed for a hundred and fifty years—was a name.

Anna said it quietly, with the flat, careful affect of someone handling something dangerous.

***"They call it the Keeper of the Gate."***

Eze nodded once. He did not write the name. He looked at Peggy across the table and his expression communicated, with the specific economy of a man who has been in this work for twenty years, everything she needed to know: this is the principality. This is the territorial spirit that the Order has been serving and that has been serving the Order. This is what we are here to address.

He said, to Anna: "How was the dedication made originally? Do you know?"

"At the Hollow Gate," she said. "The stone arch on the Voss property. It was built in 1871 by my great-great-grandfather. He consecrated it in a ceremony that established it as the threshold—the place of crossing between the natural world and the spiritual access he was seeking. Every significant ritual of the Order has taken place there since. Every new member is formally dedicated there. My daughters—" She stopped. When she resumed her voice was steady with the steadiness that costs. "My daughters have not been taken there. I have refused. For two years I have refused, and the pressure that refusal has created—within the Order, from my mother—is why I finally came to Pastor Croft. I cannot hold the line alone anymore."

"You will not have to," Eze said. "Not today. Not again."

## IV.

### 11:30 A.M. — ANNA'S DELIVERANCE

What happened in Pastor Croft's office over the next two hours was the most complex and the most complete deliverance session Peggy had participated in since the night in the lower hall of Calvary Bible.

It was more complex because Anna Voss had been in the Order for twenty-two years and had participated, with full knowledge and full consent, in rituals of dedication that Lydia's grandmother had participated in and that Marcus's mother had participated in but that neither Lydia nor Marcus had participated in themselves. The depth of the legal claim was therefore different—not seven decades of generational inheritance but two decades of direct, volitional, specific participation. Each ritual had to be named. Each dedication had to be renounced. The inventory was long and took time and Anna carried it with the focused, effortful honesty of someone who has decided that thoroughness is the only acceptable standard.

It was more complete because the forty intercessors were in the sanctuary holding the prayer covering with a consistency and a depth that Peggy had felt in no previous session. The sanctuary was twenty feet from the office. She could not hear the prayers through the wall. She felt them through the wall—the specific quality of the atmosphere in the room, which was the most thoroughly held space she had worked in since the beginning of this.

Eze led. Peggy supported, documented, and prayed. Tamika was in the office door—the specific position she had occupied in every significant engagement, the doorway between the session and the prayer covering, the living connection between the two. Marjorie was outside with her medical bag and her thermos and her forty years of steady competence.

The entity appeared at twelve forty-seven.

It announced itself not in Anna's voice but in a change in the quality of the room—a shift more abrupt and more total than anything Peggy had experienced in the sessions at the center, as though what had been keeping its distance was now choosing to be fully present. The temperature did not drop. It reversed: a heat that was not warmth, a pressure that was not atmospheric, an intensity that was recognizably the same in kind as what she had encountered before but larger in degree, the way an ocean is the same in kind as a river but incomparable in scale.

She had been in rooms with entities before. She had not been in a room with a principality.

She planted her feet.

> *"For He must reign until He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death." — 1 Corinthians 15:25–26 (NKJV)*

Eze did not pause. He did not adjust his posture or his tone. He addressed the entity with the same focused, unhurried authority he had brought to every room in this work, and Peggy thought: this is what twenty years looks like. Not the absence of awareness of what is in the room. The refusal to allow what is in the room to determine the terms.

"You are addressed," Eze said, "in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, who was crucified, who rose on the third day, who ascended to the right hand of the Father, and before whom every principality and power and ruler of darkness in the heavenly places must bow. You are addressed not by William Eze but by the authority given to every servant of Jesus Christ to address what is opposed to His kingdom. Your name is known. Your claim is understood. And your claim is invalid, because the foundation on which it rests—the dedication made at the Hollow Gate in 1871—is being revoked right now, in this room, by the last member of the line through which you entered, who is revoking it of her own free will, in full understanding of what she is doing, under the authority of Jesus Christ."

Anna Voss spoke the revocation herself. Not prompted line by line—she had prepared it in the ninety minutes of disclosure, with Eze's guidance, and she spoke it now in the clear, continuous voice of a woman who has spent two years arriving at this moment and knows every word she means to say.

She renounced the dedication of the Voss family line. She renounced her own initiated membership. She renounced by name every ritual she had participated in, every entity she had knowingly invited, every act of dedication and access she had granted. She renounced the Keeper of the Gate by the name the Order used for it. She declared her daughters free from every claim arising from her own participation. She declared the Voss property—the land, the structure, the arch—no longer consecrated to its prior purpose, its dedication transferred to the Lord of heaven and earth to whom all land ultimately belongs.

She spoke for nineteen minutes without stopping.

> *"Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it." — Colossians 2:15 (NKJV)*

What happened during those nineteen minutes Peggy recorded afterward in three separate documents: clinical notes, her own journal, and a formal account she prepared for Eze's records. The three accounts were consistent in their facts and different in their language, because the same event required different vocabularies to convey different aspects of its reality.

What all three accounts contained was this: the entity resisted. Not with the reactive aggression of Desolation in Marcus's session. With the specific, organized, sustained resistance of something that has held a territory for a very long time and understands exactly what is being taken from it. The resistance manifested in ways that Peggy now had enough experience to receive without losing ground: the physical pressure in the room, the specific cold that was not temperature, the quality of sound from a place that had no location.

It spoke. Once.

It said, in a voice that was not Anna's voice and was not the voices from the Clarksburg sessions and was categorically different from anything Peggy had encountered before—older, more resonant, carrying in it the specific weight of something that has been operating in a place for a century and a half and has come to regard that place as its own:

***"This ground is mine. I was here before your Christ was born."***

The room held that claim for exactly one moment.

Then Eze said, in the quietest voice he had used all morning, with the specific, settled authority of a man who does not need volume because he has access to something that exceeds volume:

"Before Abraham was, I AM."

> *"Jesus said to them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.'" — John 8:58 (NKJV)*

Three words. Not Eze's words—Christ's words, spoken by a servant of Christ into the claim of an entity that had announced its antiquity as its authority.

Before Abraham was, I AM.

The entity had claimed the ground on the basis of being there before Christ. The answer to that claim was the name of the One who was before everything—before the world was made, before the Voss land was consecrated, before the 1871 dedication, before Hallow's Creek was settled, before Virginia was a colony, before the ground on which the stone arch stood was anything but the raw material of a creation not yet spoken into existence.

The response to the entity's claim of antiquity was the declaration of the One who is not ancient but eternal. Not older than the entity. Prior to the category of old.

The room contracted. Not physically—nothing moved. The atmosphere contracted, the way a person contracts before a blow. And then the command came, from Eze, in the authority that had been delegated and that he had been wielding for twenty years with exactly the right combination of humility and certainty:

"In the name of Jesus Christ, before whose name every knee in heaven and on earth and under the earth must bow—leave this woman. Leave this family. Leave this land. Go where the Lord Jesus Christ sends you, and do not return to this territory."

## V.

### 1:34 P.M. — THE BREAKING

Anna Voss released a sound that Peggy did not have a clinical category for and did not try to create one. It was the sound of twenty-two years leaving. Not suddenly—in the way of a tide rather than a wave, each layer of what had been established across two decades yielding in sequence, the more recently acquired releasing first and the deeply rooted following, until the last of it had withdrawn and what remained was a woman sitting in a chair in a pastor's office in a small town in Virginia in the early afternoon of a February Saturday, breathing.

Just breathing.

Marjorie came through the door with the unhurried competence of someone who has been waiting for exactly this moment and knows exactly what it requires. She checked vitals. She noted, in her characteristic one-word clinical notation, what she found: stable. She gave Anna water. She put a blanket around her shoulders without comment and without sentiment, because Marjorie Tate expressed care through precision rather than gesture and always had.

Anna held the water with both hands and looked at the middle distance for a long moment. Not the dissociated gaze of the occupied—the focused, present, processing gaze of someone who is integrating a change so large it will take time to understand.

Then she looked at Eze.

"Is it finished?" she asked.

"For you," Eze said carefully, "yes. The deliverance is complete. The claim has been revoked. The doors through which you entered and through which you granted access have been closed. What was in you is not in you." A pause. "For the territory—for Hallow's Creek, for the land itself—there is one more thing."

Anna looked at him steadily. "The gate," she said.

"The gate," he confirmed.

> *"Arise, shine; for your light has come! And the glory of the LORD is risen upon you. For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people; but the LORD will arise over you, and His glory will be seen upon you." — Isaiah 60:1–2 (NKJV)*

## VI.

### 2:15 P.M. — THE HOLLOW GATE

The Voss property was two miles from the church, up a gravel road that turned off the highway and climbed through bare hardwood into the first fold of the ridge. Anna had given them directions and had offered to accompany them. Eze had asked her to stay with Pastor Croft and the intercessors, who would continue the prayer covering throughout the team's time at the gate. This was not a request based on doubt about Anna's courage—it was the wisdom of someone who understood that a person who has just been delivered requires protection and rest rather than immediate re-engagement with the territory from which they have been freed.

Anna had nodded. She understood.

They drove up the gravel road in Eze's car, all five of them, because the action required communal presence and because the road was too narrow for two vehicles. Nobody spoke on the drive up. Not silence born of fear—the silence of preparation. The focused, interior quality of people aligning themselves with the purpose of what they are about to do.

The gate appeared at the end of the road, at the edge of the tree line, exactly as it had been described: a stone arch perhaps eight feet high, constructed of field-laid granite, the

keystone carved with a symbol that Peggy did not recognize and did not need to. The arch had no door—had never had one, she understood. A threshold, not an entrance. A consecrated crossing point. The means by which the 1871 dedication had established, in physical and spiritual terms, the access point through which the Order had been doing business for a hundred and fifty years.

The trees around the gate were old—very old, their bare branches interlocked overhead in a canopy that the February light came through at angles, striping the frozen ground in alternating bands of light and shadow. The silence was of the deep-country kind: total and patient and containing within it the accumulated quiet of a place that has been isolated from ordinary life for a long time.

Peggy stood at the edge of the tree line and looked at the arch.

She thought: one hundred and fifty years. A hundred and fifty years of door.

She thought: not today.

> *"Lift up your heads, O you gates! And be lifted up, you everlasting doors! And the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle."*
> *— Psalm 24:7–8 (NKJV)*

Eze led them to within twenty feet of the arch. He stopped them there. He looked at each person in turn with the same assessing attention he had brought to every significant moment in this work—not checking their courage, checking their standing. Whether they were on the right ground.

He said: "What we are about to do is not a dramatic gesture. It is not theater and it is not a power encounter of the kind that requires extraordinary manifestations. It is a legal action. A formal declaration, in the authority of Jesus Christ, that this threshold is closed, its dedication revoked, its purpose terminated, and the ground on which it stands reclaimed for the kingdom of God. We do not shout. We do not perform. We speak truth in authority. Is everyone agreed?"

Yes. Five voices. One weight.

## VII.

## 2:31 P.M. — THE DECLARATION

Eze approached the gate alone.

He stood before the stone arch in his winter coat with his worn leather Bible in his left hand and his right hand raised toward the structure, and he spoke—not loudly, not with the performed intensity of someone who believes volume indicates authority—with the quiet, specific, legally precise language of someone filing a brief in the only court whose jurisdiction matters in this territory.

He named the original dedication: Ezekiel Voss, 1871, the consecration of the Hollow Gate as a threshold to spiritual entities invited to take up residence and influence in this land. He named every formal act of the Order that had reinforced the dedication across a hundred and fifty years. He named the authority under which he was speaking: Jesus Christ, Lord of heaven and earth, before whom every principality and power must bow, who by His death and resurrection had broken the power of every claim established by darkness over human souls and human land.

He declared the dedication revoked. Every ritual, every invitation, every act of consecration to the entity known as the Keeper of the Gate: revoked. The original transaction canceled. The legal ground underlying the claim nullified by the blood of the covenant.

He declared the land free. The Voss property, the gate structure, the ridge, the surrounding territory—free from the jurisdiction of every spirit that had claimed access through the gate, from this moment forward.

He declared the gate closed.

Not destroyed—he had been clear about this in the preparation conversations: the physical structure was stone and would remain stone. What was being addressed was not the material but the consecration. A threshold is not a door—it is a dedicated crossing point. The dedication was being revoked. The crossing point was being closed. The stone would remain. The access it had provided would not.

Then he turned to the team and he said: “All of you. Together.”

And they prayed. Not in sequence—simultaneously, each in their own voice, each in their own language of faith, the five of them standing in the February cold before the stone arch in the trees. Gerald’s pastoral voice, Tamika’s Pentecostal directness, Marjorie’s spare and precise petitions, Peggy’s trained and specific authority, and underneath all of them—the one she felt more than heard—Eze’s unceasing prayer in the language that was older than English and carried in it the specific weight of twenty years of this work, which was the weight of a man who

has stood in the gap between darkness and the people it was pressing and has done so faithfully enough that the standing itself has become a form of prayer.

> *"And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, 'Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down.'" — Revelation 12:10 (NKJV)*

What happened during the prayer Peggy recorded afterward, as she had recorded everything since September, with the precision she brought to difficult material. She recorded what was observable: the wind that came through the trees at a point when the air had been completely still, moving through the bare branches above the gate with a sound that was not a sound she had a name for. The specific quality of light that arrived in the clearing—not brighter, not dramatically different, but changed, the way the quality of light in a room changes when a window is opened. The temperature, which did not drop but rose, fractionally, in the specific way she had come to associate with the presence of something benevolent.

She recorded what was not observable: the sense—not felt by one person but by all five, confirmed in quiet conversation afterward—that something that had been present in the clearing was no longer present. Not dramatically removed. Withdrawn. The way a claim is withdrawn when the legal basis for it has been comprehensively defeated.

She recorded the silence that followed the prayer. Not the deep-country silence that had preceded it—different. Cleaner. The silence of a space that has been contested and is now, for the first time in a hundred and fifty years, simply quiet.

## VIII.

### 4:47 P.M. — THE RETURN

They drove back to Shepherd's Gate Fellowship in the same silence in which they had driven up to the gate, but it was different silence—not the silence of preparation but the silence of completion. The silence of people who have done what they came to do and are now carrying it back with them, the way you carry something carefully when you understand its weight.

The intercessors were still in the sanctuary. Forty people who had been praying since six in the morning had been told nothing specific about what the team was doing—they had been asked to cover, and they had covered, and when the team walked back through the door of the fellowship hall at four forty-seven in the afternoon, the forty people in that room looked up, and something moved through the sanctuary that Peggy felt in her sternum before she understood it with her mind.

They knew. Not the details. The outcome. The way the body of a person knows, before the mind has formulated the thought, that something significant has changed.

Someone in the back of the sanctuary began to sing. Not a planned song—the specific, spontaneous offering of a person whose joy requires a form. Others joined. Not all of them—some were still on their knees, some simply wept, some sat in the particular silence of people receiving something very large. But the singing filled the room with the specific quality of corporate worship that is not performance but reality: people praising God for something He has actually done.

Peggy stood in the doorway of the sanctuary and she felt it—the full weight and the full lightness of the afternoon, both simultaneously. The cost and the outcome. The years of building toward this and the specific, irreversible moment of its completion. The five sessions in the center and the night in the lower hall and the months of prayer and the team and the conference and the letter from Pastor Croft and the drive through the February hills and the stone arch in the trees and the three words Eze had spoken into the entity's claim of antiquity.

Before Abraham was, I AM.

She thought: every battle ultimately belongs to the Lord. Not in the sense that the human participation is irrelevant—it is real, it is costly, it is required. But in the sense that the authority behind the human participation and the power that produces the outcome and the victory that is claimed at the end of every genuine spiritual engagement has a source that is not human. She had been a vessel. They all had been vessels. And what they had carried had been the only thing strong enough to stand in the rooms they had stood in.

She thought about September. The parking lot of New Hope in the early morning, the honeysuckle, the marigolds, the prayer she prayed every day for twenty-two years before going inside. Let my ears hear what You hear. Let my eyes see what You see. And when I am not enough—which is always—let Your strength be made perfect in my weakness.

She thought: He answered that prayer six months ago when a barefoot girl appeared on a porch and asked for the one who prays.

She thought: He has been answering it every day since.

> *"For the battle is not yours, but God's." — 2 Chronicles 20:15 (NKJV)*

Gerald found her in the doorway and stood beside her without speaking. They stood together for a moment watching the sanctuary—the singing, the praying, the weeping, the specific communal expression of people who have witnessed something real.

Then Gerald said, quietly, in the tone he used when he was about to say something that mattered: "Do you know what Jehoshaphat said before the battle?"

She knew. She had been a student of Scripture for thirty-seven years.

"He appointed singers to go before the army," she said. "Praising God. Before the battle was fought."

"And what happened?"

"The enemies destroyed each other. Israel didn't have to fight."

Gerald looked at the singing sanctuary. "We fought," he said. "But notice who won."

> *"And when they began to sing and to praise, the LORD set ambushes against the people of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah; and they were defeated." — 2 Chronicles 20:22 (NKJV)*

She stood in the doorway of the sanctuary a while longer. Then she went in.

She sat in the back row. She did not sing—she did not have the singing voice of the people around her, had never had it, and had made her peace with this long ago as one of the charming limitations of being herself rather than someone else. But she listened to the singing with the specific quality of attention she brought to everything that mattered: fully, without reservation, receiving it as the gift it was.

After a while she closed her eyes. She was not praying in any structured sense. She was simply present—in the room, in the singing, in the aftermath of the afternoon, in the life that had been building toward this since before she knew it was building toward anything.

She thought: the battle is the Lord's.

She thought: it has always been the Lord's.

She thought: and He has allowed me—specifically, deliberately, by name—to stand in it. Not to win it. He won it two thousand years ago on a hill outside Jerusalem. To stand in it. To be the person who shows up. To be the answer to the prayer of every person who needed someone to walk into the room with them and say: I know what this is. I know who is stronger. And I am not going anywhere.

She thought: that is the whole calling.

She thought: it is enough.

> *Saturday, February 15th. Hallow's Creek. I am writing this in the parking lot of Shepherd's Gate Fellowship while the others are still inside. I needed five minutes of quiet to write what I need to write before the details blur. The gate is closed. One hundred and fifty years of open door, closed. Anna Voss is free. The community of Hallow's Creek is not, in one afternoon, wholly transformed — the Order still exists and its members have not all chosen differently and the work is not finished. But the primary point of access — the original door — is shut. The consecration has been revoked. The territory has been formally reclaimed in the name of Jesus Christ. What I learned today that I did not know at this depth before: The battle is not mine. It has never been mine. I am a participant in something that was won before I was born and that will be completed after I am gone. My role is to show up, with the right authority, in the right community, in obedience to the right Lord. To stand in the gap. To speak the right name. To love the person in front of me with whatever portion of His love I can carry. When Eze said 'Before Abraham was, I AM' into the claim of the Keeper of the Gate, the room changed. Not because of Eze. Because of the One whose words those are. The entity claimed antiquity. The answer to the claim of antiquity is not greater antiquity — it is eternity. Before everything. The I AM who spoke creation into existence was before the ground on which the arch stands. The arch is made from His creation. The claim of ownership over His creation by what He created is the oldest lie, and the answer to the oldest lie is the oldest truth: He was. He is. He will be. Every battle belongs to Him. Every battle. Not the ones that are dramatic and confirmed by the singing of forty intercessors and the closure of a hundred-and-fifty-year-old door. Also the Tuesday morning sessions. Also the conversations in the break room. Also the client who walks away. Also the 3:17 in the morning. Also the Cedar Mill Road moments. Also the ordinary,*

> *invisible, unremarked-upon choosing of obedience over comfort that happens every day in the interior of a person who is trying to live toward God. Those battles too. He wins them all. I am grateful — with my whole body and my whole history and my whole opened, emptied, scoured, refilled self — to have been in the room. Amen.*

She closed the journal.

She sat in the parking lot of Shepherd's Gate Fellowship in the February cold with the quiet of the Virginia hills around her and the sound of forty people singing to God coming faintly through the walls of the small church, and she felt—not for the first time this season, but more completely than she had ever felt it—the specific quality of a life that is exactly where it is supposed to be.

Not comfortable. Not safe in the ordinary sense. Not free from what would come next—and there would be more, she knew. The Order still existed. Carla Simmons was still in the Waiting column. The conference was one week away. The paper was still being written. Raymond Okafor was still learning to live in a house that no longer had the specific pressure his wife's history had placed on it, and learning it was quiet work and would take time.

There was more. There was always more, in the Kingdom. The work does not finish until the King returns.

But tonight the gate was closed.

And tonight the battle—this battle, this specific, particular, located, named battle—belonged to the Lord.

She started the car.

She drove home through the February hills, and the trees stood in their winter architecture on either side of the road, and the sky above them was the hard, clear blue of a day that has been honest about everything it contained, and somewhere behind her in the fold of the ridge, a stone arch stood in the bare hardwood forest in the early dark of a winter evening.

Just a stone arch now.

Just stone.

❖ ❖ ❖

*End of Chapter Fifteen*

# THE BATTLE WITHIN

*A Novel*

By Dr. Paul Crawford

*Chapters One through Fifteen — Complete*

*"The battle is not yours, but God's."*
*— 2 Chronicles 20:15*

## EPILOGUE

# *More Than Conquerors*

*Six Months Later*

> *"Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." — Romans 8:37–39 (NKJV)*

> *"And in those days shall the holy and chosen ones be planted, and all the chosen ones shall stand before Him on that day. And the faces of all the angels in heaven shall be bright with joy because on that day the Elect One has arisen." — 1 Enoch 61:5 (R.H. Charles translation)*

### I.

September came again to Clarksburg, Virginia.

It came the way it always comes in the Shenandoah foothills—gently, almost apologetically, with the soft insistence of a season that knows it is beautiful and has the good manners not to call attention to this. The honeysuckle along Meridian Street had been gone since July, but the marigolds were back at the base of the New Hope Counseling Center's front walkway—Tamika had planted them in April, in the same bed where they had burned the previous October, a small act of deliberate continuity that Peggy had noted and loved without saying so.

It had been six months since Hallow's Creek. Seven months since the night in the lower hall. Twelve months, almost to the day, since Nora Ellison had appeared on the porch without an appointment or a coat or shoes, with her hand flat against the door as though reading the building through her palm.

Twelve months.

Peggy sat at her desk on a Tuesday morning in the second week of September with her coffee and her Bible and the conference schedule for the upcoming year—the second annual THE BATTLE WITHIN conference was already over-subscribed, three hundred and forty registrations from seventeen states and two Canadian provinces, a number that still arrested her when she looked at it, not because she was surprised that the need existed but because she had not anticipated the speed with which the need would find the resource.

She had a ten o'clock appointment. She had a stack of correspondence from practitioners who had attended the February conference and were now, in their own communities, beginning to see what she had begun to see in October and who were writing to ask what she knew and how she had learned it and whether she would come and speak or consult or simply be in the room with them while they tried to find their footing in territory their training had not prepared them for.

She had a paper under peer review at a journal that published at the intersection of psychology and theology, submitted in June, returned with revisions in August, resubmitted in the third week of September. She had heard nothing yet. She had prayed about it and released it, which was the appropriate posture and also the only one available to her.

She had a great deal of work.

She thought: good.

> *"Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." — Philippians 1:6 (NKJV)*

## II.

The testimonies had accumulated across the months the way good things accumulate when the ground has been properly prepared: quietly, specifically, one at a time, without fanfare, in the ordinary texture of ordinary lives resuming their ordinary courses.

She had documented them. Not because they required documentation for legal or professional purposes—though she maintained her clinical records with the same rigor she had always maintained them—but because she had understood, early in the months following February, that the testimonies were themselves a form of spiritual warfare. The record of what God had done was a weapon against the accusation that He had done nothing. The specific, named, dated account of a transformed life was the most thorough refutation of the enemy's argument that the cost was not worth the outcome.

She kept them in a separate section of her journal, under a heading she had borrowed from the second half of Revelation's twelfth chapter: The Word of Their Testimony.

She read them sometimes, when the work was hard and the progress was slow and the weight of the ongoing battle pressed on her with the specific fatigue of someone who has been in a long engagement and is not yet at its end. She read them the way a soldier reads letters from home: not as escape but as reminder. This is what you are fighting for. This is what the cost produces. This is what it looks like when the battle belongs to the Lord.

### THE WORD OF THEIR TESTIMONY

*Selected accounts — September through September*

> **Lydia Crane — Age 37** *David says he got his wife back. He means this precisely — not the version he married and then watched change, but the version that was always underneath what was happening, the one he always believed was there. She is leading a small group for women in the church who have spiritual histories they have never disclosed to anyone. She calls it The Opened Rooms. She called me last week to say that three women have begun, in the group's second month, to use language they had no previous framework for. She asked me what to do next. I told her to call Gerald and to keep going. She is magnificent.*

**Marcus Tilley — Age 18** *He graduated in June. Dottie called me the morning of the ceremony to describe his face when he walked across the stage, which she said was the face of a young man who understands that the diploma is not the most significant thing he has received this year. He is enrolled at the community college in the fall, studying criminal justice. He told me in our final session that he wants to work with young men who are where he was — not in spiritual terms, necessarily, but in the terms of a life that has been pressing from the inside without anyone knowing how to name it. He is seventeen months out from the night in the lower hall. The silence in his head has held.*

**Nora Ellison — Age 24** *She is still at the bookshop. She is still at Calvary Bible. She is meeting monthly with a spiritual director — a woman Gerald recommended, who has been doing this for thirty years and who described Nora to me, with the specific admiration of one practitioner recognizing another's work, as 'the most theologically curious new believer I have encountered in a decade.' She is reading everything. She has questions about everything. She brings them to me sometimes, by text, at odd hours, and I answer as honestly as I can and refer her to better sources when I run out. She asked me three weeks ago whether she was going to be okay. I told her: you are already more than okay. You are becoming. She said: what am I becoming? I said: yourself. She said: good. That's what I want.*

**Raymond Okafor — Age 47** *He is teaching again with the full force of the man he was before the voice started. His students, by his own account, have noticed — not that anything is different but that something is more fully present, the way a room is more fully a room when it has been properly cleared. He brought his wife's photograph to a session in April and set it on the table between us and said: I want to grieve her correctly now. We spent four sessions doing that. Real grief, not the complicated grief that the voice had been contaminating. He told me in June that he had begun attending a grief support group at New Covenant Baptist and that it was the hardest thing he had done since the burning in the garden. He is doing it anyway. That, I have learned, is what healing looks like.*

**Sandra Beaumont — Age 59** *Her daughter called. In May. Seven months of silence, and then a call. Sandra told me about it with the contained, precise emotional vocabulary of a woman who has learned to hold significant things without being broken by their weight. The call was not reconciliation — it was a first step toward it, which is the right pace for a relationship that has carried the weight that theirs has. They have*

> *spoken four times since. Sandra is praying for her daughter every day, specifically and by name, which she had stopped doing during the years of estrangement because the pain of it was too great. She is doing it again. The accuser has no jurisdiction over her past. She files it nowhere.*

> **Anna Voss — Age 38** *She has moved from Hallow's Creek. She and her daughters — eleven and nine, named Ellie and Grace, which I find significant in a way I won't try to articulate — are living in a rented house in Clarksburg. She attends Calvary Bible. She is in formal discipleship with a woman from the church who was herself freed from a complicated spiritual history eight years ago and who meets with Anna weekly with the specific, patient love of someone who knows the terrain from the inside. Her mother has not spoken to her since February. Anna told me this without flinching, which is itself the testimony. She is building a new life on cleared ground. She is doing it slowly and she is doing it right.*

> **Carla Simmons — Age 33** *She called in July. She had been gone five months. She said: I think I'm ready to come back. I said: I'll be here. She came in the following Monday and sat in the window chair and said, without preamble: I know what I walked away from. I know what I walked back to. I'm not walking away again. We have been meeting for six weeks. The work is different now — faster, more direct, less circling. She knows the terrain. She just needed the five months to decide she was willing to walk it. She is walking it. The name on the Waiting list has been moved.*

## III.

She closed the testimony section of the journal and sat for a moment in the September morning with the specific quality of gratitude that she had come to understand, across a year of this work, as the most important thing she carried into each new day. Not gratitude as a feeling—feelings were unreliable and she had never built her practice or her faith on them. Gratitude as a posture. An orientation. The deliberate, daily choice to receive what had been given as gift rather than as entitlement, and to hold it with open hands so that it could flow through rather than accumulate.

She thought about what the year had contained. The September morning when she had sat in the parking lot for the first time with her prayer and her thermos and the sense of something beginning. The October sessions and the names that had announced themselves in voices that were not human. The night in the lower hall and the two people who had come out

of it breathing. The January assault and the Cedar Mill Road fear and the February preparation and the hills outside Hallow's Creek and the stone arch in the bare trees.

She thought about Elijah under the juniper tree.

She had thought about Elijah before, in Chapter Nine, in the context of the wounded warrior and the cost of significant engagement. She thought about him differently now. Not the Elijah asking God to let him die—the Elijah who got up. Who ate. Who traveled forty days on the strength of two cakes of bread baked on coals. Who heard the still small voice in the cave and stood in the cave's mouth and received his next assignment. The journey from the juniper tree to the cave's mouth to the next assignment was not a triumphant narrative arc. It was a person, depleted, sustained, restored, given the next thing to do.

That was the shape of the life she was living.

Not triumph. Sustained faithfulness across a long engagement, with specific deployments of extraordinary grace at the moments the ordinary grace was insufficient, and the ordinary grace sufficient for all the rest.

> *"And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. So it was, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave." — 1 Kings 19:12–13 (NKJV)*

## IV.

The conference in February had been, by the measure of every external indicator, a success.

Three hundred and twelve attendees from eleven states. Forty-seven pastoral leaders. Twenty-three licensed clinical counselors. Six physicians, including two psychiatrists who had come skeptically and who had remained through the final session, engaged, asking precise questions, their skepticism not dissolved but in the process of being complicated by what they had heard. Eze had presented for four hours across two days with the quiet, comprehensive authority of a man who has spent twenty years in this work and knows how to speak to people who have not, without condescension and without dilution. Gerald had provided pastoral framework. Marjorie had led a session on the medical dimension of spiritual engagement that

had been, by several accounts, the most practically useful hour of the conference. Tamika had organized everything with the comprehensive efficiency of someone who has found her precise assignment and is deploying it without remainder.

And Peggy had stood at the front of a room of three hundred and twelve people and had told the truth.

Not the sanitized, carefully qualified, professionally insured truth of someone managing the presentation of difficult material for a skeptical audience. The full truth, in clinical and theological and personal terms, of what she had seen and learned and been changed by across the year that had remade her. She had named names—not her clients' names, which remained confidential and always would, but the names of the entities she had encountered, the names of the mechanisms, the names of the theological principles that organized what she had experienced. She had been specific about her own failures and her own locked rooms and her own October inventory and the Cedar Mill Road morning and the three words spoken into the carpet of her study.

She had been, for two hours in the front of a room of three hundred and twelve people, completely honest.

The response had been, in some quarters, what she expected: discomfort, qualification, the careful professional distance of people who had come to learn but had not come to be personally implicated. In other quarters it had been something she had not expected and that had undone her, briefly, in the Q and A: a room full of people recognizing, simultaneously and in their individual silences, that what she was describing was something they had seen and had not had language for. The number of questions that began with "I had a client once…" The number that began with "In my own family…" The number of people who came to her afterward and said, in the specific, relieved language of someone who has been holding something uncertain for a long time: "I thought I was the only one."

She had learned this, and it was perhaps the most practically significant thing she had learned across the whole year: the isolation of the experience was itself one of the enemy's primary weapons. The counselor who has encountered this and cannot name it stays isolated. The pastor who has seen this in a congregation and cannot find a peer to speak to stays isolated. The person who has lived this and cannot find language for it stays isolated. The naming breaks the isolation. The community breaks the isolation. The conference was not an event. It was a network node. A place where the isolated found each other and discovered they were not alone.

*"For the Lord your God is He who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you." — Deuteronomy 20:4 (NKJV)*

## V.

The paper had been accepted. She received the email on a Tuesday morning in October—the Tuesday morning of the second week, which was the same day of the same week of the same month that Nora Ellison had first appeared on the porch twelve months before. She did not consider this a coincidence. She had learned across the year that God's calendar is more precise than she had previously allowed, and that He takes specific pleasure in the timing of His gifts.

The title of the paper was: "At the Intersection of Clinical and Spiritual Frameworks: A Practitioner's Account of Presentations Requiring Expanded Assessment Criteria." The title was clinical in its caution and deliberately so—she had written it for a peer-reviewed journal with a mixed readership, and she understood that the first responsibility of someone who wants to be heard by skeptics is to speak in language that does not immediately categorize the speaker as someone who can be dismissed. The body of the paper was less cautious. It made the argument she had been building since October: that the clinical framework was insufficient for a category of presentations that it currently had no adequate account of, that the spiritual and clinical dimensions of human experience were not mutually exclusive domains, and that the integration of the two—undertaken with clinical rigor and theological precision and proper accountability structures—produced outcomes that neither framework alone could achieve.

She had cited her case outcomes. Not by name—ethical standards applied and always would—but by anonymized presentation and result. The outcomes were, by any measure, remarkable. Not miraculous in the sense of exceeding natural explanation—that was a theological claim and the paper was not a theological document. Remarkable in the clinical sense of producing sustained, documented, measurable change in presentations that had not responded to conventional clinical approaches.

The peer reviewers had been, by the evidence of their revision notes, divided. One had been dismissive in the specific, polite way of someone who has been trained to be dismissive of things that challenge their framework without engaging the challenge. One had been cautiously interested, asking for additional documentation of the assessment criteria she had developed. The third had written a single line at the end of their review that she had read three times and then written in her journal: "This is important work. Do not let the discomfort of others make you less clear about what you have seen."

She had not. She did not intend to.

## VI.

On the second Saturday of September—one year, almost to the day, from the morning she had sat in the parking lot of New Hope and prayed her daily prayer before going in—she convened the team.

Not for a crisis. Not for a specific engagement. For what Eze had named, when she proposed it, a war council in peacetime: the deliberate, unhurried gathering of people who have fought together to take stock of what they have learned and what they are called to next, before the next significant engagement arrives.

They met at Calvary Bible, in the lower hall—the same room where Lydia and Marcus had been freed. The room had been painted over the summer, a deep cream that made it feel both larger and warmer, and someone had placed a small wooden cross on the wall beside the kitchen entrance where there had been bare plaster before. The room had been changed by what had happened in it. Not visibly—the paint was fresh and the cross was new and there was nothing about the physical space that would tell a visitor anything specific. But she felt it, standing in the doorway: the specific quality of a space that has been used for its truest purpose.

The team sat around the folding tables in their usual configuration: Eze across from Peggy, Gerald to the left, Tamika to the right, Marjorie in the corner with her tea. Two additional chairs had been pulled up—Pastor Elias Croft had driven from Hallow's Creek, and Pastor Anthony Webb from New Covenant Baptist had asked to be included as the year's work had expanded into his congregation.

Seven people. One table. The quiet purpose of people who know each other well enough not to require ceremony.

Eze opened with prayer, as he always did: dense, specific, addressed to the One they served with the directness of someone who has been in conversation with Him for fifty years and has no interest in formality for its own sake. Three minutes. The atmosphere of the room changed the way it always changed when Eze prayed, settling into the specific quality she had first noticed in his office in Charlottesville and that she now understood as the fruit of a sustained and serious prayer life: the quality of a space that is being properly tended.

Then he said: "Tell me what you have learned this year. Each of you. One thing. The most important one."

> *"Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know." — Jeremiah 33:3 (NKJV)*

Gerald said: "I have learned that the Church in a community is not a collection of separate congregations. It is a body. And bodies function as bodies, not as independent organs. What we did in this past year—the pastors around the table, the prayer canopy, the conference—was the body beginning to function as the body. I had been pastoring for forty years without fully understanding that."

Tamika said: "I have learned that intercession is not auxiliary to the work. It is the work. Everything else—the sessions, the deliverance, the conference, the paper—is the visible expression of what the prayer is doing in the invisible realm. I have learned to pray first, and longer, and more specifically than I ever did before."

Marjorie said: "I have learned that medicine and faith are not competing frameworks. They are different instruments measuring the same human being. I spent forty years as a nurse who happened to be a Christian. I am now a Christian who happens to be a nurse. The order matters."

Pastor Croft said: "I have learned that the darkness in a community does not survive exposure. For a hundred and fifty years the Order operated in Hallow's Creek because the Church did not know it was there. The moment it was named and the moment the body of Christ assembled against it—it lost. Not gradually. Definitively. I have stopped treating the darkness in my community as inevitable background. I am naming it."

Pastor Webb said: "I have learned that my congregation contains people who have been experiencing things they did not have language for, and that my job as their pastor is to provide the language. I have started preaching on spiritual warfare with the specificity this work has taught me. The response has been—" He paused. "People are bringing me things they have been carrying for years in silence. Because I named it from the pulpit, they understood they could name it to me."

Eze said: "I have learned that God prepares people for what He calls them to, and that the preparation is not always legible to the person being prepared. I watched Peggy Walters walk into this work in October without knowing that twenty-two years of clinical training and thirty-seven years of faith and the specific, costly, particular experience of her own interior were exactly the equipment the work required. I have learned that God's equipping is precise. I had

known this theologically. I have seen it demonstrated this year in a way that has renewed my faith in His faithfulness."

Then everyone looked at Peggy.

## VII.

She thought about what she had learned. Not the list from the end of Chapter Ten—those seven lessons were real and she stood by every one of them. She was looking for the thing that was underneath the seven. The root of the root. The single thing, if there was one, that the year had produced in her that was more fundamental than everything else.

She thought about September and October and November. She thought about the sessions and the nights and the locked rooms and the Cedar Mill Road morning and the stone arch in the trees. She thought about Lydia's eyes when she surfaced from the entity's occupation. She thought about Marcus saying: is it always going to feel like this? Like I can breathe? She thought about Nora, wet-haired, in the fellowship hall, saying: the leaving looks like a storm. The coming in looks like breathing.

She thought about the three words spoken into the carpet of her study. Stand in the gap.

She thought about Before Abraham was, I AM.

She thought about the parking lot of Shepherd's Gate on a February afternoon, alone in her car with the journal in her lap and the sound of forty people singing through the walls.

She thought about what she had prayed, every morning for twenty-two years, before going into the center: Lord, let my ears hear what You hear. Let my eyes see what You see. And when I am not enough—which is always—let Your strength be made perfect in my weakness.

She said: "I have learned that I was praying the right prayer."

The table was quiet for a moment.

"The prayer I prayed every morning before going in was the prayer that opened the door to everything that followed. I had been praying it for twenty-two years as a professional ritual—as the clinical counselor's equivalent of scrubbing in before surgery: necessary, appropriate, habit-shaped, sincere but not costly. This year it became the actual prayer I was praying. Not a ritual before work. The work's foundation. Because I discovered that I genuinely could not hear

what He heard and see what He saw and be sufficient to what was in those rooms without Him, and the prayer became real in the way it had always been true but had not always been lived."

She paused.

"I have learned that the gap between believing a thing and living it is the territory where the real formation happens. I believed every word of that prayer for twenty-two years. I began living it twelve months ago. The gap between the believing and the living cost me the year I have just described. And I would not give a single day of it back."

> *"Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen." — Ephesians 3:20–21 (NKJV)*

## VIII.

The meeting lasted three hours and ended with the kind of prayer that a room full of people who have learned to pray seriously produces: specific, corporate, unhurried, addressed to the One they served with the full weight of a year of verified experience behind every word.

Afterward, walking to her car in the September evening—warm still, the first hints of the turning in the trees, the marigolds along the New Hope walkway visible across the street in the fading light—she passed Tamika in the parking lot.

Tamika said: "You know what I keep thinking about?"

"Tell me."

"The morning she came. The barefoot girl. If she had come to a different center—if she had found a different counselor, one who hadn't been prepared—" She shook her head. "I know that's not how God works. He had a plan. But I think about it sometimes. The specific way the pieces fit."

Peggy thought about it. She had thought about it many times across the year, in different lights and from different angles, and it had never stopped producing in her the same quality of awe: the sense of a design so precise and so personal that the only adequate response to it was the specific, bodily gratitude of a person who has been found.

"I think about what Lydia said," she said. "That she was supposed to be Lydia Crane, with that history, in that town, in that year. And so was I."

Tamika looked at her. "And so was I," she said quietly. "I have thought that too."

They stood in the parking lot for a moment in the September warmth, two women who had been in the rooms together and who carried the year in the specific way that shared experience is carried: as a thing that belongs to both of them and neither of them, as a gift that was given to them together and that they will spend the rest of their lives being shaped by.

Then Tamika said: "What comes next?"

Peggy looked at the center across the street. The lights were on inside. The marigolds were gold and orange in the evening light. There was a new client scheduled for Monday morning—a referral from Pastor Croft, a man from Hallow's Creek with a history she did not yet know and a presenting concern she had not yet heard.

She thought: more work. Of course more work. The work does not finish until the King returns.

She thought: good.

"Monday," she said. "There is a new client on Monday."

Tamika nodded. "I'll make sure we have tea."

They got in their cars. They drove home through the September evening—separate directions, the same city, the same year behind them, the same God ahead of them and already there.

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The last journal entry of the year was dated September 14th, a Tuesday, one year and two days after Nora Ellison had first appeared.

It was not long. The significant things, she had learned, rarely required length.

> *September 14th. I walked into the center this morning at seven forty-two. Eighteen minutes before the first appointment. The honeysuckle is gone but the marigolds are*

> *there. I sat in the parking lot for a moment with my coffee and my Bible and I prayed the prayer I pray every morning. Lord, let my ears hear what You hear. Let my eyes see what You see. And when I am not enough — which is always — let Your strength be made perfect in my weakness. I have prayed this prayer for twenty-three years. This is the first year I have known, from the inside, what I was asking for. He answered it. He answered it in a barefoot girl and a woman who called herself only Nora and a deacon's wife who stood at a rain-streaked window and a seventeen-year-old who asked whether it would always feel like breathing. He answered it in a stone arch in the February hills and forty intercessors and the word of their testimony and a parking lot on a Saturday afternoon. He answered it in three words spoken into the carpet and a letter from a pastor and a team I did not assemble and a community that found its way to the table. He is answering it still. New client Monday. New history. New room to stand in with the same authority and the same love and the same name that has not changed since before Abraham was. I am fifty-five years old. I have been a Christian for thirty-eight years. I have been a counselor for twenty-three. I have been a warrior for one. I intend to remain one. More than conquerors. Through Him who loved us. Amen.*

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*End of Epilogue*

# THE BATTLE WITHIN

*A Novel*

By Dr. Paul Crawford

*Chapters One through Fifteen • Epilogue — Complete*

*"Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us."*
*— Romans 8:37*

# A Note from the Author

Thank you for choosing to read *The Battle Within*. It is my prayer that this story will do more than entertain you—it will encourage you to deepen your walk with Jesus Christ and remind you of the reality of the spiritual battle that surrounds us every day.

This novel is a work of Christian fiction. The characters, dialogue, and events are fictional and were created to tell a compelling story. However, the spiritual principles woven throughout these pages are rooted in the timeless truths of God's Word. The Bible clearly teaches that believers are engaged in spiritual warfare and that our greatest weapon is not human strength but the power of God working through His Spirit.

The purpose of this book is not to create fear of Satan or fascination with demons. The devil is a defeated foe. His power is limited, and he remains subject to the sovereign authority of God. The central message of this novel is not the power of darkness but the supremacy of Jesus Christ, who conquered sin, death, and the grave through His death and resurrection.

As Christians, we often recognize the visible struggles of life—broken relationships, emotional wounds, temptation, grief, addiction, loneliness, and suffering. Yet behind many of these battles lies a greater conflict that Scripture calls spiritual warfare. Whether the enemy attacks through deception, discouragement, temptation, or fear, his goal remains the same: to draw people away from God. But the Lord has not left His children defenseless. He has given us His Word, His Spirit, the privilege of prayer, the fellowship of the church, and the armor of God.

Peggy Walters is an ordinary believer placed in extraordinary circumstances. Her courage does not come from personal strength or special abilities but from her unwavering trust in the Lord. My hope is that readers will see in her story a reflection of every Christian who seeks to faithfully serve God in a world filled with spiritual opposition.

If this book encourages you to spend more time in Scripture, to pray with greater confidence, or to trust Christ more completely during life's battles, then it has accomplished its purpose.

Always remember that no matter how fierce the conflict may become, the outcome has already been determined. Jesus Christ is victorious. Because He lives, those who belong to Him can face every trial with hope, confidence, and peace.

As you turn the pages of this novel, I invite you to do more than follow Peggy's journey. Consider your own. Ask yourself where the battle within is being fought in your heart, and allow the Lord to strengthen your faith as only He can.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you always, and may you stand firm in the faith until the day you see Him face to face.

*"Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil."*
— Ephesians 6:10–11 (KJV)

May God richly bless you as you read.

***Dr. Paul Crawford***